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THE STRANGER SPORT'S SHAKE-UP;



A RIDER, WHOSE HANDS WERE BOUND TOGETHER BEHIND HIS BACK, CAME TEARING DOWN THE STREET, STEERING STRAIGHT FOR THE SALOON.

OR, Red-Hot Rube's Racket AT RED BEND.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "LIGHTNING
SPORT," "THE RIVAL ROVERS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT THE MEN ON THE MOUNTAIN SAW.

"CRACK!"

The sharp report of a rifle echoed along the mountain-side, and rose on the evening air.

Two lurkers heard it from their eyrie as they glared downward and caught a view of what was going on below, and their hands tingled, and their whole souls twitched because they were not "in it."

The two were evidently sentinels; and if looks went for anything they were not outposts for a very chivalrous army. They were both coarsely clad, with unkempt hair, savage faces, and heavily armed.

One had cocked his Winchester mechanically, and thrown it to his shoulder. Though far enough away to make the movement but a gesture of nervous interest, perhaps it was well for the men below that the fellow watching went no further than pantomime. A Winchester with a downward aim sometimes carries a long distance.

The men had been watching the proceedings in the pass beneath for some time.

At first there was a good deal of merriment about their occupation; later on it was rather a matter for breathless interest.

A roughly-clad man had come slouching along the trail, looking about him from time to time, as if for a place which would serve for concealment, and perhaps ambuscade.

He found it at length, for after a brief view of his surroundings, he shook his head, gazed back a moment in the direction whence he had come, then climbed up a low bank upon one side of the trail, and dropped out of sight among the bushes.

"Looks ez though he might be one ov us," chuckled one of the sentinels.

"Ef it warn't fur orders, I'd feel mighty much like goin' down ter help him. He seems ez though he might be green in ther biz, and it's a pity sich a likely lookin' chap ain't started in ther right road when he's a settin' out in life."

"Hold your hush! Them greenhorns ain't safe fur pards, nohow. They's jest ez likely ter mount a squad ov cavalry as they be ter hold up a good, fat angel, with bulgin' wallet. They ain't no jedgment at all."

At the same time the speaker put up his hand, the better to emphasize his caution. Their voices could not possibly be heard below, but as a point of professional etiquette, under present conditions, silence was to be observed.

The traveler came in sight, after the manner he was expected; and he was not a difficult looking subject, either; yet, the moment the two watchers set eyes on him, they seemed strangely moved.

First, they stared, silently and eagerly.

The man who rode along so apparently oblivious of what the fates had in store for him, was tall and well built, and was clad in a suit which would have been pronounced fashionable by a keener observer, even, than the two,

He was lounging easily in his saddle, after the fashion of a rider who had come a long journey, but who was in no great haste to reach his destination.

He turned his head carelessly from side to side, and it looked as though it might be with the same intention as the man who had preceded him, though there was wide difference in the attitudes of the two.

Even from a distance it could be seen that he was heavily armed. A belt around his waist supported a pair of forty-four caliber Smith and Wesson's and a knife, while over his back was slung a rifle, which was so hung that it could be brought around to shoulder with a single motion.

But, fine-looking though he was, his horse was the more noticeable of the two.

The animal was a dark bay, without a single white hair on it, and stepped along, full of life and pride, though never offering to break the moderate gait to which his rider had drawn him.

And this the horse, quite as much as the man, attracted the attention of the two watchers up on the mountain-side.

"By ther jumping Jehu!" exclaimed one of them.

"It's him! I'd know that cussed, lounging, fear-nothin' figger ez fur ez I could see it; an' ez fur ther hoss—that ain't sich another tromp this side ov purgatory. It's Dan Garland, an' his hoss Firebug! I'd know 'em ez far ez I could hear 'em."

"Dry up!" retorted his companion.

"You think nobody's got eyes an' ears but yerself? Ef we hadn't bin put hyer ter look fur him you wouldn't 'a' knowned him

frum a tenderfoot misshunary, er a galoot that hed drapped down hyer frum Long Branch er Saratogy. We war sot hyer ter see ef he come, an' ter find out whar he war goin'. Ef we don't fill ther bill ther boss will be askin' why not, an' askin' it mighty earnest like."

"Dunno who he's arter, but it looks a heap ez though ther galoot in ther bushes war arter him. Ef he ain't gilt-edged, copper-bottomed, an' full-rigged, he'll be apt ter find him, too—much time afore he knows it."

And still grumbling indistinctly, the fellow turned away his gaze again.

Dan Garland, if that was the name of the rider, suddenly leaned forward, drawing his steed to a still slower pace, and leaning over as his eyes peered downward at something he noted on the trail. At the same time his right hand went to the butt of a pistol, and hung there for a second or two.

"That's him!" muttered one of the men on the mountain.

"Ther galoot in the bushes must 'a' just come on ter ther trail back thar at ther turn, er Dan would 'a' seen his track sooner. Ef he hedn't bin all-fired keerless—fur him—he'd bin onto it afore now. An' yit, I'll bet six ter one ther pore cuss ain't left more sign ov track than a tumble-bug would 'a' made, rollin' acrost ther road. Oh, a nasty one he are ter hev on ther trail, an' ther on'y wonder are he ain't seen us."

"Hush yer whist! Who'ster tell he ain't? What's he goin' ter do next?"

The question was speedily answered by the actions of the man himself, who tossed up his bridle hand, causing the steed to once more proceed at the traveler's jog which he had been keeping when first he came into view, while once more the rider lounged carelessly in his saddle, paying no further attention to the trail.

Yet, it was not far to where the footman had left the roadway; and, as that spot was reached, the rifle at Dan's back came suddenly around to his shoulder, the muzzle pointing upward toward the wall of shrubbery on the bank above; then his finger touched the trigger.

As a specimen of snap shooting with a rifle it was beyond praise; but, for once, he seemed to have missed his mark.

Almost blending with the report of his Winchester came another, and there was a little spurt of flame from the mountainside.

"Caught him on the turn! By mighty, he's made ther rifle!"

In wild excitement the man spoke, and leaping to his feet, he aimed his gun, and would perhaps have pulled trigger had not his companion been more prudent, and thrown up the muzzle of the weapon, with a low snarl.

What they saw was some excuse for their agitation.

At the second report the body of the horseman suddenly pitched sideways, and though his knees appeared to mechanically tighten, he looked little more than a crumpled heap of humanity, ready to pitch headforemost to the ground.

At the same time, almost, the horse, evidently alarmed, gave a great bound, and then started on a headlong flight, with the lines flourishing loosely around his neck.

At this, the bushes parted, and the lurker there stepped out into plain view, holding in hand the revolver, the barrel of which was yet warm.

He lifted the weapon, and turned its muzzle for an instant on the fleeting figure; but no discharge followed. He lowered the gun, shaking his head as he did so, and watching the furious flight stood with intense eagerness indicated in every line of his figure.

"Why don't he shoot? Cuss him, why don't he shoot?" said one of the spectators above. "It ain't too fur fur a navy six ter kerry."

"That's jest bercause he knows whar his lead went to, an' that ef he on'y wants ter git Dan Garland he's got him now. He war figgerin' on a shot at ther hoss, an' he's play-ed it white. Firebug are too good a critter ter be drapped like that. Didn't I told yer so?"

The latter exclamation was called forth by seeing the stricken man go rolling off his

horse; but the two saw with a muttered curse that when he reached the ground he did not lie in the ghastly heap they expected.

Whether it was because of his fall, and the impetus therefrom, or because he still had wit, and sense, and strength enough to make an effort to save himself from the fate he feared, for one reason or the other, he kept on rolling toward the side of the trail until he disappeared abruptly over the edge of the gorge which lay on that side!

Then, the man who had fired the fatal shot sprung down once more into the trail, and slouched heavily but swiftly toward the spot.

He did not halt, there, however, longer than to take one glance over into the gorge, but ran on until he was lost from sight around another bend in the trail.

"He knows a good thing when he sees it," chuckled one of the men, in high glee over what he had seen.

"He's goin' fur Firebug, now—an' don't I wish he may git him!"

"He'll git his fool brains kicked out ef he tries that game on," retorted the other.

But while they were casting anxious looks toward the spot where Dan Garland had disappeared, and wondering whether it was their duty to go down, they heard the clatter of hoofs, and the bay horse once more came into sight, tearing around the turn, snorting like a demon!

"I dunno who he is," said one of the two, following the horse and new rider with admiring gaze until they vanished; "but, the feller who kin lay Dan Garland cold, an' catch an' ride Firebug, are a blamed good man."

CHAPTER II.

RED HOT RUBE.

WHEN the mounted man had flashed out of their range of vision the two turned and looked at each other, and there appeared to be genuine admiration in the face of each.

"Reckon when that gerloot sets out ter do a job an' calls it done, it are did. What's your pinyon, Woolly West?"

"Ef not, why, not?" was the answer; "but all ther same, I'd thankee not ter men-shun names quite so free, er some day I might be shoutin' fur Tiny Tim whar it'd be mighty onpleasant hearin', even ef Dan Garland be gone over ther range. An' I should jedge that our next job are ter find ef he's went."

"Kayrect, ef we be sure that gerloot won't come a-wanderin' back ter look how he done ther trick, an' take 'count ov stock."

"Don't count on his gittin' back fur a hour er so. He's a bigger contrack gittin' Firebug tamed than he hed layin' out his late boss. At last accounts ther hoss war runnin' away, an' most likely he's runnin' yit."

"Then, thar's no use waitin'. We kin go down right now, an' git away afore he gits back—if he comes. That's all we're hyer fur, an' I reckon, whichever way ther cat's hopped, we kin go back an' report."

It did not seem they had any fears of the stranger, except that they did not wish to be seen by him; and after the first step had been taken even that gave them no trouble. They came boldly down, and rushed eagerly to the place where the wounded man had fallen from his horse.

There was no trouble in finding the trail he had made, as he rolled away from the track in the road; but beyond that their investigation showed little if anything.

The fellow who had been called Woolly West looked cautiously over into the gulch, but soon drew back with an oath.

No sign was there of a body below; and yet, if Dan Garland had gone over those rocks his corpse would have been lying at their foot.

And if he had not taken the drop, what had become of him?

It was an ugly conundrum, anyway they chose to look at it, and after some more research they were forced to conclude that the man had not been as dead as they thought and hoped.

That thought sent them away from the spot a great deal quicker than they had come, and after a brief consultation, when they had got to what they considered a safe distance, they returned to their post on the mountain-side.

"Blame it all, we was put hyer ter watch, an' I don't guess we're expected ter go waltzin' off on a blind trail like that. Jes' lay low fur ther present, an' when ther boss calls us in we got full big ernuff story ter tell him, 'thout runnin' our heads inter furder danger."

Nevertheless, they kept a closer watch than ever on the trail, and so did not notice the person who approached from their rear until startled by a boyish voice, just at their shoulders.

"Say, you Woolly West, you an' your pard can sashay up to headquarters as soon as you have a mind to. The Cap is waitin' for you, an' he's as cross as a bear with a sore head, so you better feel him lightly, and, if he seems too hot for you, just get out of the way the best you can. He don't seem to think you are exactly keeping your eyes wide open, or you would have seen something by this time. He ought to have put up a quart or so in a little brown jug. You could have seen twice as much, and had the cheek to tell it."

"We've seen a heap, Cherry Bite," was the answer.

"Ef we war on'y dead sure ov what we've seen that same quart would a' bin set up two er three times fur ther good news we kerried an' we bin a-waitin' ter be called in. Ther job's over, an' thar's no use ter be foolin' hyer ary longer. Dan Garland hez went by."

"An' ef we hed bin put whar a white man an' a pius miss hunary orter bin put we could a' helped drop him. We thought we seen him throwed cold, but blamed a sign is that ov a corpus."

The messenger seemed to be a good looking boy of fourteen. He had a laughing face and a clear eye, and was stoutly dressed. He grinned as he listened to the news.

"That's always been the trouble," he said, lightly, and with an air of good-natured disbelief.

"Now you got him, and now you ain't got him. And then, the next turn in the game he's got you. Tell it over, and tell it a little slow. While you are yawning we can all three be keeping a good look-out, and perhaps we can see some more of it."

With an occasional interruption from Tiny Tim, who seemed given to chaffing his companion, Woolly West told the tale, and how they had found no trace of the body which they had been certain was at the foot of the precipice.

Cherry Bite listened with unwonted soberness to the story, and at its close asked no questions, but with a word to keep the two there, hurried down to the trail to the spot where the rider fired his rifle. There he scanned the road carefully, and when the brink of the gorge was reached, the scrutiny was keener than ever, and the look into the mountain gash was long and earnest.

"It's not altogether one of Dan Garland's games," the youth said, clambering back to Woolly West and his pard.

"I found something you seem to have missed, and if you hadn't been able to tell the boss it was there, he might have made it awful sultry. There's blood on the rocks where he went over. I'll swear to that, but I wish there was more of it. If he's hurt bad enough to need repairs, he'll crawl into Red Bend, and Nippers will bring us word of him. If he dies getting there, so much the better. It will save a heap of hard work, and perhaps several other funerals. Now it's time to be going. The sooner the news gets to headquarters the better."

The work for which the scouts had been sent out had been accomplished, and the three left the spot without a backward glance.

They were too busy with the contingencies of the case to think much of anything else, and as they went along they spoke only of the man named Dan Garland.

They moved on at a rapid walk, but nearly an hour had passed before they came near to the place of their destination.

Then, they began to move with more caution, and finally halted just as, from an innocent screen of bushes, arose a low-voiced hail.

The men had been recognized, without a doubt, but discipline had to be maintained.

When the word had been duly given by Woolly, who advanced with his empty hands

raised high above his head, the others stepped to his side, and as they passed the screen the man within called to them:

"Better hurry along. The boss is in a steamin' hurry, and acts as though he warn't goin' to wait much longer."

"Don't I know it; but I'm bringin' him news that'll be good fur his 'hulsome."

And having said just enough to arouse the deepest curiosity, Woolly and his friends grew obstinately silent, but quickened their gait. In a short space of time they found themselves in the midst of a small hamlet, of half a dozen rudely constructed huts; and to the best finished of these Woolly advanced, to give a signal rap on the post of the door frame.

The knock, light though it was, received an immediate answer, and Woolly, pushing open the door, passed in.

A man was lying stretched upon a rude bunk, but as Woolly entered, he rose on his elbow and glared at him, while one hand closed over the revolver which lay by his side.

"In the fiend's name, what luck?" he gurgled in a thick whisper, even as he spoke a momentary wave of pallor sweeping over the face which had been flushed with fever. A spasm of pain was darting through his body, which was followed with a retching that racked his whole frame.

After that had subsided he lay silent for a moment, apparently trying to gather strength. Through it all Woolly stood watching, with a very sober look on his face. He could see the captain was a sick man.

The violence of the attack having passed, the invalid turned his eyes on West, and the latter made his report with military brevity and directness.

The captain—for such he was—took it without difficulty, listening keenly.

"And this fellow who did the shooting—have you ever seen him before? Did he seem like a man who was worth a trip down here to Dan Garland. It's no ordinary cut-throat who can draw Dan Garland on his trail. And from what you say he seemed to know that he was being followed. He may have been the cause of the demon detective coming this way, after all."

"Shore ov it, boss. Thar warn't no love lost atwixt 'em, and when they got in shootin' distance they just plugged on sight. He looked like a slouch, first off, but no one-horse galoot kin han'le ther tools er sit saddle like him! He looked ez though he war a king ov ther rustlers ez he flew by."

"Enough. Orders have been given, and we'll look out for Double Cinch Dan if he tries to come our way. Go now. This infernal fever is burning me all up, but it ought to blaze itself out by morning. I'll have work for you then. You and Tim be ready to report. You are off duty now."

Woolly backed out of the presence of his chief, thinking he had come off from the interview much better than he had been led to expect.

At some little distance, alongside of a cabin, a group of men were lounging, and towards them he bent his steps.

Tiny Tim was already there, telling his story, and Woolly was welcome as one who could add something to it. They knew who Double Cinch Dan, the detective, was, only too well, and the thought that he was coming into the region around Red Bend to hunt down this gang of bandits, which had for some time been flourishing there, was almost enough to cause a stampede. It was really unfortunate they knew anything about the possibility.

For a long time the thing was talked over. It was more exciting than the knowledge that a treasure-box was going out on the coach from Red Bend, and no guard with it.

An hour or two went by, and there was a new sensation, which called every man to his feet. In the distance was heard the sharp clatter of horses feet, rapidly coming nearer.

Then, the sentry gave a sharp hail, following it up by a shot from his carbine.

The clatter never ceased until, the next moment, a horseman dashed into the open, and drawing his steed up with a suddenness that was marvelous, sprung lightly to the ground, his empty right hand thrown up with the palm open and outward.

"Stiddy all!" he exclaimed. "I'm Red-

Hot Rube, the royal rustler. I've jest took Dan Garland's scalp, an' I want ter see yer boss."

CHAPTER III.

VISITORS AT RED BEND.

A DOZEN pistols were drawn like a flash, and as many muzzles were turned upon the man who had announced himself as Red-Hot Rube. Had he made the least aggressive movement he would have been riddled with bullets.

He was as cool, however, as an iceberg, and appeared to enjoy the sensation he had created.

"Stiddy, boys!" he drawled once more. "Reckon you kin understand ther king's English, which are me! I don't say I'd a' come hyer ef this infernal brute hedn't bring me so fur on ther road it warn't wu'th while ter turn back. Now that I am hyer I want ter see ther boss. Which ov yer am him? I got word fur his picturful year which are wu'th ther tellin'."

Woolly West took a step forward, looking keenly at the man before him.

If he had not been able to recognize the intruder he would have known Firebug, in spite of the subdued condition of the steed, who stood there dripping with sweat, and bearing other marks of a long, hard ride.

"Stranger, ef we hedn't hed a glimp' beforehand ov what yer no doubt got ter say it's more ner doubtful ef you'd a' bin livin' yit. But you don't want ter tangle yer feet up more ner you kin help, yarin' 'bout how yer done up Dan Garland, fur we seen him fall. An' though we is all squar' men hyer, an' good ter tie to, et's not safe, nowhar, ter be shoutin' Double Cinch Dan's name too loud—fur Dan ain't dead yit."

Red-Hot Rube drew himself together as though some one had slapped him between the eyes. He glared at Woolly West in angry doubt, as if trying to make out whether this was sober earnest, or a grisly joke.

"Not dead? Why, I drawed on him; an' when he dropped an' rolled over inter ther drink, men ner angels could save him frum the everlasting smash."

"All ther same he wa'n't dead, an' ef me an' my pard ain't 'way off he crawled away to'ards Red Bend. He's mighty hard ter kill, an' afore long you'll be apt ter hear ov him ag'in. Ther boss are sick; but ef you kin tell him ther real, eternal truth why ther demon detective came down hyer I wouldn't wonder ef he'd rise up an' see yer."

"That's my name," said Rube calmly, and leading Firebug to one side he hitched him near several other horses.

From first to last he had never been entirely uncovered by the pistols of the outlaws; and as he followed Woolly to the shack of the outlaw chief he was just as carefully watched. He might have slain Dan Garland, and yet not be altogether trustworthy.

Woolly's cautious rap was answered by a pettish request to enter; and after a word or two of explanation the stranger was ushered into the hut, while West withdrew.

Red-Hot Rube did not seem at all concerned when he found himself in the presence of the chief, though he saw a muzzle pointed his way, and that there was no friendliness in the tones of the voice which bade him come forward.

"You call yourself Red-Hot Rube; what have you been doing?"

"I give yer that name hyer 'cause I thought it might be re-recognized ez ther rustler's what shot Kunnel Kerry ov ther U. S. A.; but I could a' gl'n ye a dozen more, all ov which I hev kerried, an' most ov which I hev did jesticie to. I knowed they hed sat Dan Garland on my trail 'bout ther Kerry 'fair, an' I let him trail me hyer, an' then give him his gruel. There boys outside hev bin sayin' I didn't finish my work. I can't b'lieve it; but ef I didn't thar are time yit ter do ther job, an' Red-Hot Rube are ther boy ter undertake it."

"And what brought you to us?"

Racked as he was by the fever in his frame the captain was still cautious, and not above suspicion. The answer was prompt.

"Ther blamed hoss. I hed an eye fur him, an' I swore I'd down Dan, an' ride away on his hoss; an' I done it. But, ther anamile rode me jest ez well, an' a leetle

better. We hed a fight fur it, an' if I say it myself, it takes a man ter ride that critter. By ther time I got him pulled in he hed brung me purty nigh hyer, so, when I seen I war in a trail that didn't look ez though it war leadin' ter Red Bend, I jest foller'd it."

"And now?"

It required a vast deal of bracing up by the sick man to get the question out but he succeeded, though before the answer came he had sunk back, with his head between his hands.

"With Dan Garland on my trail l reckon you kin judge it's rest an' a private patch that I'm after myself. Guess I better stay hyer an' run things a bit. Ef I'm not away out you need a nurse."

There was no response, and Red-Hot Rube first gave a start and then grew very serious as he gazed down on the outlaw chief. He saw before him a man sick almost to death, yet he knew that there was little he could do for him.

He scratched his head like one who was bothered, half turned away, but once more began to watch the face which began to look like that of one who was dropping into stupor.

After a while he walked thoughtfully to the door, and stepping out, looked around.

Woolly West was the nearest, and he called him toward him with a beckoning motion of a finger.

"Say! yer boss are in a bad way," he began, speaking little above a whisper.

"Somebody orter stay with him, but I don't want ter ring no one into ther job without fair warnin'. Like ez not it's s'uthin' ketchin'. Ef I da'st ter do it I'd go in ter Red Bend fur medicine. Are there ary man hyer ez you kin trust ter go?"

"Great snakes, no! Not till Nippers kims out; an' I ain't sure ther job orter be give ter him. Them ez would go da'ssn't, an' them as could go wouldn't kin back ag'in till they dreened all Red Bend dry. What does ther boss say?"

"He sez nothin', an' won't be apt ter. What yer goin' ter do 'bout it?"

"Let me look at him," was the answer.

Woolly seemed a rough sinner, whose hands were tolerably red with crime, but he was loyal to his captain, and made a step forwards.

"I ain't tryin' ter hinder. Fact are, I'd sooner yer would; but I've give you fair warnin'. It's like ter be ketchin'."

Woolly did not hesitate. For one thing, he had been in the room but a little before, and thought that, as he had already been exposed, there was little further risk to be run by a hurried inspection.

All was quiet within, and Woolly did not stay long. When he came out his face was a good deal whiter than when he went in, and he turned to Rube with an anxiety he could not disguise.

"'Pon me soul, pard," he whispered, "I b'lieve he got ther small-pox!"

"That's about what they call it," was the cool answer.

"Looks ez though it war a bad case too; an' ef he ain't elected fur over ther range it's a close squeak. If ther boys knowed it what'd they do?"

"Skip to er man," was the prompt response.

"Ain't got airy a man hyer ez ain't afeared ov it, be ye?"

"Hold on, now. Thar's ther blame Mexican Tony. He's hed it, er his face lies, awful."

"Well, I ain't hed it, an' I ain't afeared ov it; but you know how it is yerself. I don't want ter see a good man die fur want ov nu'ssin', an' I won't do it, either; but I'll give that same Tony fifty dollars clean out ov me own pocket, an' all he kin strike ther boss fur, ef he'll take hold ov ther case. An' then, we got ter hev some drugs. Ef ther Greaser kin look arter ther captain, an' keep his clam-trap shut, what's the matter with you an' me goin' down ter Red Bend? Ef they knows me than an' tries ter stop me, so much the wuss fur 'em."

"It's a whack. I bin vaccinated myself, but I'd a heap sight sooner reesk Dan Garland, down at Red Bend, than ter sit a night with him in thar. I'll go fur Tony, an' post ther boys just fur ernough ter let 'em know whar we're goin' and that is fur medicine. We'll hev some grub afore we start, an' we

kin make the ride an' git back hyer afore mornin'."

Woolly West apparently forgot that he was talking to one not as yet of their gang. To be sure, he had all the proof he wanted to convince him this party was about of his own way of thinking, yet, under other circumstances the trust would not have been so sudden and complete.

How he managed it Rube did not know, but everything was attended to; and he and Woolly were mounted and galloping along the trail which led to Red Bend long before he had thought it would be possible.

Woolly had effected an exchange of horses for him, because he did not think it safe to take the horse which had belonged to Dan Garland into the town; but the animal which the rustler bestrode was a good one, and the long ride was made without any adventure whatever.

Red Bend boasted of a doctor of considerable skill, who was able also, from a fair stock of standard medicines, to fill his own prescriptions.

He slept in his own shanty, and fortunately was that night at home. In response to a knock at the door, he simply awoke, rolled over, and yelled, "Come in!"

Doctor Borden had been following his profession among the miners for some years, and had learned considerable. When the door opened he calmly covered the figure of the man, who could be dimly seen, with the muzzle of his revolver, and sharply asked his business.

"Frank an' squar', Doc, I ain't so sure yer wants us ter step ary furder. Et's this hyer way. We got a pard in our shack, up on ther mount'in, an' he's all-fired sick. Thar's four ov us thar; Mike, an' me, an' Long Dave, an' Jack Rodgers, what are ther man ez are sick. Mebbe I know it, an' mebbey I don't know it; but ef I do know it, he's jest gittin' down with ther small-pox. We've hed a hard run ov luck, we hev, an' we ain't down ter bed rock yit, so we cain't 'ford ter be hevin' a man all ther way up thar, so you jest give us ther hull stock ov drugs what'll take him through ther course, an' we'll pay yer spot cash, an' do ther best we kin fur him."

The story was a little long-winded, but it put Borden in possession of most of the facts of the case, and a few questions sharply asked, explained the exact condition of the sick man.

"The chances are you are right in your diagnosis. I don't know that I could pull him through, and I can assure you I have no inclination for the job; but perhaps I ought to go see him. If he gets worse and you come or send you can count on me, and I'll never trouble you with my bill till you have made your strike."

"That's hearty, pard. Ef you'll write out ther most 'portant part ov ther d'reckshuns, it'll save ther trouble ov furgittin' em. An' what's ther damage?"

It took some little time to do up the desired articles, and write out directions for their use in a simple form. The payment seemed to well nigh exhaust the stock of small coin at the disposal of the two men, but they resolutely refused to let a dime of the amount "stand."

When they reached the street again, Rube hesitated.

"Pard Woolly, I ain't ther sorter man ter worry much ef Double Cinch Dan are on my track, but ef he are I'd like ter know it. Ef you could take jest a leetle swing 'round town, an' find out ef he did git hyer alive, an' in fightin' trim, you'd do me proud."

The hour was not too late to find the saloons open, and the games in full blast. Woolly was anxious to be on the trail again, yet the thought of a glimpse at life in town had its attractions.

"Ef I kin find Nippers, I'll know," he said. "That's what he's hyer fur, an' I'll make a weenty try fur him. He o'rter be 'round the Big Pocket S'loon about now."

He went gliding away in the shadows, leaving Red-Hot Rube to the somewhat perilous task of waiting with the horses.

He was gone for some time, and when he came back it was a good deal more rapidly than when he went. He vaulted into the saddle without a word, and led the way out of Red Bend.

"I've seen Nippers," was all he said until

they had got at least a mile away from the last straggling houses which marked the limits of the town.

Then he appeared to breathe freer, and began to speak.

"I seen Nippers, an' Dan Garland be there! Leastwise, a chap come in this p.m. with a han'kerch'if 'round his head, an' lookin' all 'round a heap ther wuss fur wear. But Nippers sez he ain't goin' ter die yit, an'll be out on ther war-path in a day er so ef s'uthin' don't happen to him. An' ef he's goin' ter camp on your trail—look out! Dan Garland are a holy horror on nine wheels."

CHAPTER IV.

NIPPERS TAKES A SHOT.

THE information which Nippers had imparted to Woolly West was, in the main, correct.

What Nippers said he had found out generally did prove to be so. It was his business to be correct, and he was very well paid for it.

In Red Bend, Nippers posed as a sport on a cheap scale, and had the reputation of being a successful one. As a short card player he had various resources not set down in the orthodox rules of the game; and as he was cold-blooded, cunning, and quick to note a change in luck, the lambs with whom he seated himself to play usually rose up no richer for the sitting.

Nippers, however, sported a gold watch and chain, a diamond pin, good clothes, and a half hidden but effective battery of guns, which he had brought into use several times since he became a resident of the Bend.

And no one had ever heard him called Nippers once. Vincent Doyle was the name by which he had introduced himself, and by that name, with several additions or abbreviations, he was usually called.

He was good looking, too, after a wicked fashion, and knew more of the female population of the town than did any other man in the place, save, perhaps, the postmaster.

On this very evening he had been lounging on the porch of the Big Pocket Saloon, sitting in the shadow of the building, and waiting for the work of the evening to begin. The time for that was some hours off, but in the interim he could profitably occupy himself listening to the gossip of the other loungers, and watching what was going on in the main street of Red Bend. It was here he got on the trace of half the information he furnished to the gang up in the mountains. It was there he had learned when the Red Jacket was going to make a shipment of gold, and it was sitting in the same chair that he heard how the same shipment had been taken in by the knights of the road, who had been duly apprised of its coming.

As quick as any, his eye caught sight of a stranger who came down the street, and he looked at him the more keenly as he thought he could see something familiar about the figure.

The stranger was tall, and fairly well dressed, though his clothing was somewhat disarranged, and from under his hat protruded the ends of a handkerchief which was bandaged tightly around his head. He was not sure but what there was a smudge of blood on the face.

The new-comer reached the Best Chance Hotel, however, and when he did not appear in the course of about an hour Nippers went over.

The man was not visible, but it was not hard to obtain information in regard to him. His method of appearance made him a public character, and any one could ask questions about him without awakening the suspicion that for so doing there was an especial cause.

Solly Bowers, the proprietor, had been curious himself, and had obtained all the intelligence in regard to his new guest that was possible. He was only too glad to retail it to any and all inquiring friends.

The arrival called himself Jackson Shaw, and claimed to be a prospector, and something of an investor, though the private opinion of Solly Bowers appeared to be that he was more of a sport.

He claimed, also, to have been attacked by road-agents on his way thither, who fired

on him from ambush, wounding him in the head, and tumbling him from his horse.

He escaped them, however, by hiding in a gorge, though they got his horse; and it had taken him a long time to make his way to town. He had eaten a moderate supper and then gone off to bed. He did not seem to be dangerously hurt, but, rather, pretty well played out.

This was what Nippers had learned up to the time when Woolly West found him out, and it was not hard to believe that this might be Dan Garland, the detective, when he had heard the hasty story of his pard from the mountain.

Indeed, a faint suspicion had already arisen, since he had been warned that the man of many disguises was supposed to be on the way.

"Keep yer eye on him," cautioned Woolly as he was leaving, "an' don't hev him git his eye on you unless yer can't help it. Ther boss wants ter know what he's doin' hyer afore he locks horns. He's blamed uncomfortable ter take hold ov unless it's got ter be did, an' somehow he allers gits ther under holt. We kinder got a idear who he may be after, an', dog-gone et, ef et's so, et'll bring him right our way, too. I shouldn't wonder ef we skipped ther ranch tell ther fun are over, though that wouldn't be my way."

"I'll let you know more about him before long," said Nippers, who was somewhat glad when Woolly went away. He was nervous about prolonging such an interview, with Dan Garland in the same town.

Nippers did not go back to the Big Pocket Saloon.

Although there was no need to do it, since under his orders his cue was to wait for developments, he felt as though he wanted to learn something on his own account in regard to the stranger, and accordingly he quietly made his way toward the Best Chance.

"There is something familiar about him, and that's a fact," he thought to himself.

"It appeared to me I ought to know the man as soon as I put eyes on him; but if it's Dan Garland he's made up to a touch even Demon Dan don't often reach. Appears more like a fellow who had tried to fix up so as to look like Dan, and hadn't hit it at all. If I could just see him once by himself, when he didn't think any one might be looking, I'd know, sure enough."

He knew all about the interior of the Best Chance, since he boarded there himself, and Solly had told him which of the little boxes known as rooms the Stranger Sport occupied.

As he drew near to the hotel he marked the window of the room, and saw to his satisfaction that a light was burning.

"If I just knew whether he was asleep!" was his thought.

"When such a man does close his eyes he's generally got a whole lot of lost time to make up, and the chances are they are shut pretty tight. I might get the sight at him I want."

"But if he's awake I don't think I want to monkey around his headquarters much at the still hour of midnight. A mouse couldn't move his way without getting his eye on it; and when it comes to shooting at a shadow! oh, my! Double Cinch Dan is all there."

The Best Chance was a more pretentious building than the most in Red Bend, and boasted of a second story. The windows were small, but they consisted of double sashes, and the lower one was raised in the stranger's room. Nippers stood under it a moment, listening.

He was not certain, but he thought he could hear the low breathing of a sound sleeper, so his courage rose. He got a board which was lying conveniently near, and raised it so that the upper end rested on the sill.

Then silently, and with his gaze fixed on the aperture above, he began to crawl upward. The moon on the other side of the house threw this side into deepest shadows, and unless some one blundered very near there was not great likelikood of his being seen.

He reached the sill without much effort, and first peered cautiously over its level.

All was quiet, and he drew himself still

further up, and rested his elbows on the sill, staring into the room.

The man lay there, fast asleep, his face turned toward the window, and plainly to be seen by the light from the burning lamp which stood upon a rude little stand near the head of the bed.

"It's Dan Garland if my mother's only darling knows beans when the bag is untied," he thought.

There's only one thing can fetch him down here, and if he don't go away in a box some of us will stretch hemp. What's the matter with my doing the trick now?"

He put one hand back to his hip, still holding himself with the other, and drew a revolver.

"The face of the same cursed hound who hung poor Dandy, and the face of the man who would hang me if he got the chance. I'll spoil its beauty now. It'll only make one more thing to swing for."

So he thought, and cautiously he cocked the weapon as he thrust it forward, over the window sill.

The noise, slight though at times it might have seemed, entered the ears of the man on the bed like a sharp burst of thunder, after a flash of chain lightning.

In a second he was all awake, and the hand he threw up held a self-acting revolver, the trigger of which he pulled as the barrel found a level.

At that same instant Nippers disappeared. A woman had darted through the shadows, from the corner of the house, and giving a sudden tug at the board, cast Vince Doyle headlong. When she sprung away in one direction, he went in another.

For the present the fun was over.

CHAPTER V.

VINCE DOYLE STRIKES A SNAG.

THE report of the pistol excited some attention, and Solly Bowers was pounding at the door in no time to see what it meant, while, before he got an answer, Nippers came out of his own room at the other end of the hall, shouting to know what was going on. He had run around the house, mounted the porch, and crawled into his own window, with a speed and courage born of desperate alarm.

As it happened, no one saw him enter the building, and his appearance was so prompt that if one had been needed Solly would have given him an oath-indorsed *alibi*.

It seemed as though the man inside was ashamed of his work, for he was slow to answer. When he did it was with a laugh.

"Oh, it's all right, now. Must have had the jim-jams, or been a little off. When I woke up I thought there was some one trying to get into my window, and I just let drive."

"Did yer hit him?" asked Solly, with accumulating interest.

"No, and that's what settles it. At that distance, if there had been a man there I would have blown him to kingdom come. You can go out and hunt around for a corpse if you want to, but I can't see any signs of one from up here, and I guess I have as good eyes as the next man."

"Well, yer don't want ter be makin' ary more sich mistakes," growled Solly.

"Ef yer does I'll settle 'em with a club ter-night, an' you'll hev ter find some other place ter git yer chuck in ther mornin'."

So he went away, grumbling, and being heard by other boarders, especially by Nippers, the excitement was over for the night.

"Don't sound exactly like his voice," thought Doyle, as he proceeded to turn in in reality; "but then, who can tell just how Dan Garland's voice really does sound? I'll take a closer view of him by daylight, and sing mighty low about this little adventure to the captain."

The strangest part of it was that Nippers was not aware of the fact that he had been tumbled off the board, probably just in time to save his life. He thought he had caused the welcome catastrophe in his efforts to escape.

As he had made his appearance from his room, and gone back to it again, there seemed nothing better for him to do than to go to bed in earnest, though it was an hour

or two earlier than the time at which he usually retired.

He fell asleep without much trouble however, and never opened his eyes until the bell rung for breakfast. By the time he had dressed, and washed, and got to the breakfast table, the greater part of the boarders had eaten and gone, and in that way he missed seeing the man who called himself Jackson Shaw.

It was easy enough, however, to obtain information from Solly Bowers, without seeming to have more than a passing interest in the little affair of the previous night, and Solly was started.

Of course, the landlord gave a great deal of collateral information which was not strictly reliable; but finally came down to the facts which Nippers more particularly wanted to know.

Jackson Shaw was up on his pins again, not much the worse for his adventure with the road-agents, and had engaged board at the Best Chance, paying for a week in advance, and saying something about a permanent residence.

The Stranger Sport had money, and Solly thought, if he knew anything about what was to be read in faces, that the man was simply a high-toned sport.

Bowers was a judge of sports, but then, he knew very little about detectives; and Nippers knew that Dan Garland could be a good deal of both when the fit was on him. As he was turning away from the landlord the stranger came in.

He looked a little pale, and there was a bit of courtplaster on one corner of his forehead, which apparently covered a slight wound.

He looked sharply at the two or three loungers, got a couple of cigars from Bowers, and threw himself back into a seat near to the counter.

The weed did not appear to please him any too well. When he had lit one of them and taken a few draws, he took it out of his mouth and looked over it critically. When he began again to smoke it was with a sigh of resignation.

It was Solly who began a conversation with him; and Nippers listened for some time before he gained any intelligence.

Yet, he saw that Shaw was gradually working the conversation around towards some point he had in his own mind; and before long understood that the drift of it was to find out whether there had been any late arrivals in town, resembling the man of whom Woolly West had spoken.

No such stranger had been seen in Red Bend, and so Solly said; and after that the stranger appeared to be much more interested in the saloon business of the place, and the size of the games to be found. Had it not been for the information he had received, Vince Doyle would never have suspected this man of being an officer of the law.

But, being forewarned, he was forearmed, and was able to read between the lines. He knew well that he was running strong risks of being recognized as the man who had looked in at the window the night before, and at whom the stranger had fired; but Nippers had nerve, and had reason to believe that the man found nothing familiar about his face. After a time, being satisfied that he would not learn anything further of importance, he got up and went out.

As a general thing he kept his bed in the morning. When, by any chance, he arose in time for breakfast, he afterwards filled in the spare hours by a long stroll—to steady his nerves with, as he had said.

On these strolls he sometimes met a messenger from the outlaws, who came to learn if there was news of any importance.

He went out for such a stroll this morning.

He had told Woolly what little there was to be told at their meeting the previous evening, but knowing as he did the earnest interest the outlaws took in the presence in town of the detective, he thought it possible he might as well learn if there were any orders for him. He stepped off without hesitation, and soon was out of the town.

As he drew near the spot where, if at all, he would meet the messenger, he became aware of the fact that another stroller was abroad—and the other stroller was a woman!

"Great snakes!" he thought to himself, "here's the handsome mystery! What in the name of all the sinners is she doing out

here? There's something snide about her, if she is visiting at the judge's. She must have stamps, and I wouldn't wonder if she was open to a mash. There couldn't be a better time to find out."

Vince Doyle had an idea that he was a lady's man, and the success he had met with in certain circles went far to confirm him in the belief. He had the courage of his convictions, such as they were, and never hesitated about showing it.

He stepped a trifle faster than he had been doing, and began to gain upon the lady who was walking in front of him. Several times he had seen from a distance this visitor at the house of Judge Sanford, and had admired her. It struck him she might have seen that he walked out this way occasionally.

"If she is looking for this individual it would be a pity if she didn't find him," was his thought; and as the lady halted he cleared his throat with a gentle, "Ahem!"

The lady looked around in a startled way, and was not reassured at seeing Nippers standing there, a villainous smile on his face, and his hat in his hand.

"Good-morning, madam!" he saluted, with a bow as low and as graceful as he knew how to make. "You look as though you might be in trouble, and if you are, no one would be more willing, or better able, to help you than myself. If you will give me your confidence I can assure you it will not be abused; and—it seems to me we have met before."

"You will excuse me, sir. It is a mistake. I do not know you, and assure you that I do not want to, either. Allow me to pass."

She would have returned to Red Bend at once had Nippers only stepped out of the way.

Unfortunately, he was a trifle provoked at the scorn which he detected in her tones, and at the same time was aware of the fact that she was somewhat frightened.

He retained his position, and even held out his arms, to show her she could not pass.

"You are mistaken, yourself, madam, and you are angry with your very humble servant. I want to make all that right before you leave me. Listen a moment to reason, and then you can go your way—if you want to."

Nippers could put on a great deal of style, and this was an occasion which he thought demanded it. It occurred to him that he would compare very favorably with any man whom the lady was apt to meet at Red Bend, and that this was his opportunity. In that way it came about he was already anticipating a victory which would make him the seeming friend, if nothing more, of the handsome woman who was searching him through and through with looks which would have blasted if she could have had her way.

And yet, Nippers fancied that most of all she was angered and alarmed lest what he said might be the truth—that he might be some one who had once upon a time been an acquaintance, if not a so-called friend.

He thought a moment.

In the life he had for years been leading he had considered all which came into his net as fish. If he saw a fair woman, or a wealthy man, he remembered her, or him. Some day the knowledge might be worth dollars.

A moment more, and he knew who this woman was!

Three or four years ago he had seen her, or her duplicate. She was then a wife, whose husband was a rising man. Upon the bank of which her husband was president, Nippers and certain pards had designs; and though they failed, he had forgotten neither man nor wife.

Nor had he forgotten something which he had heard concerning the pair, not so many months ago.

"Of course, you understand," he went on, "that I know you got away with the old man, and are here in hiding; but you ought to believe me when I say that is as much a secret with me as with you, and that I am your solid friend. You will believe me when I say your secret is worth a thousand dollars; and I scorn to sell it. Let me explain."

He advanced closer, holding out his hand, with a smile on his features, and—then, it seemed as though a house had fallen on him, or he had been struck by a cyclone. There was a little thud, and Nippers was lying senseless on the trail, while a tall, gentlemanly looking man was raising his hat, and speaking with careless ease:

"Better retire while he is asleep. If the little wretch speaks to you again without permission I'll break his neck."

Without waiting to return thanks the lady fled away.

CHAPTER VI.

JACKSON SHAW NAMES HIS TERMS.

NIPPERS hit the ground hard, and lay motionless long enough to allow the lady ample time to make her retreat.

Her champion did not seem at all concerned about the possible quarrel he might have on his hands when the fallen man recovered his senses, nor did he make any effort to assist in their return!

He did not even think it worth while to attempt to disarm the gambler outlaw, though the touch of his hand would have loosened the belt of arms that this morning he carried at his waist.

On the contrary, he lounged back a little, until his back rested against a huge boulder, and then watched the prostrate man with a smile on his lips.

After a little, Vince Doyle gasped and moved uneasily. He put his hand to the back of his head in a dazed sort of way; then he covered his face with his hands while he recovered his wits, which had certainly "gone wool gathering."

The stranger did not move nor speak, though he knew from certain evidences that Nippers was aware of his presence. He rather suspected Doyle was nursing his wrath until his strength returned, intending to go on the war-path shortly thereafter.

In that he made no mistake. Suddenly, with the spring of a panther, Nippers was on his feet, his hand on the butt of his revolver. He meant to draw as he wheeled, and shoot as he faced his man, but, as he rose, the voice of the other gave a warning that even he was not mad enough to disregard.

"I've got you lined! Steady as you are, little man! When your hand leaves your belt my hammer comes down. Then—good-morning, Mr. Doyle!"

"Curse you, you struck me! I'll have your heart's blood!" snarled the gambler, as he glared at his *vis-a-vis*.

"In your mind, little man; in your mind! But, don't tempt me too far, for I have a mighty big notion to blow you cold, and have done with you. If I hadn't a sneaking idea it may pay to patch up a truce, and buy you out and out before the frolic is over, I don't know but what I would do it."

"You couldn't buy one side of me, Dan Garland, if you bid from now till judgment day, and had the bank of California behind to back up your offers!"

"Whew!" whistled the stranger, looking more keenly than ever at the maddened speaker.

"Oh, you needn't think I don't know you, or that I don't understand the contract. You are holding a hand as Jackson Shaw over there, but I knew you, you sleuth-hound, the moment came you came down the street, striking for the Best Chance."

"Before how many citizens of the Red Bend have you aired that opinion?"

"I'm not given to blowing about what I know. It ain't worth half as much."

"That's right, little man. You just keep your place on that platform and you'll be apt to live a heap-sight longer. And now, about that little deal I spoke of. I didn't intend to broach the subject till we both got a little older, but things have been climbing up on me, and perhaps I had not better wait. I want you, and I'm not going to pay any big price for you, either."

"You can't be exactly a fool, Dan Garland."

"Excuse me, Mr. Doyle. That is twice you have used that name, and that is enough of it. If you look on the register Solly Bowers is trying to keep, you will find my name inscribed—Jackson Shaw, Frisco. Please don't forget it again."

Jackson Shaw was cool, and apparently careless, but all the while Vince Doyle knew the derringer in the pocket of the gentleman from Frisco was trained his way; and all the while he remembered that when Dan Garland—as he insisted in his mind on considering this individual to be—shot from his pocket he was seldom more than an inch from a plumb center at twenty yards.

"Jackson Shaw, then, if you want it. If you know anything about me you ought to have it all down in your books that I am not for sale, and that if I was I'd be a little too high-priced for the size of your wallet."

"I know considerable about you, Vincent," and Shaw smiled grimly as though Doyle was a man about whom much could be known.

"I suspect I could tell the year of your birth, the town you were born in, the name of your mother, and the record in your private graveyard. I could tell the date of your failure at Marvin's bank, and the age, even, of the night watchman you scuttled the night of that failure."

In spite of his nerve Nippers shuddered a little. This was the way Dan Garland might be expected to talk; and the worst of it was, he never lied.

"Of course, I recognized you at the window last night, but that don't count. It all went in the day's work, and I was glad to see you were coming my way without my having to go to any great trouble or expense."

"Now you are lying," growled Vince Doyle.

"Not as much as you wish I was; but let that go. I just want to show you are a little off in your figures. Why, man alive, I know you like a book, and have wealth untold. I can buy the prettiest bit of hemp ever hung from a tree, and I can fit it around your neck too neatly for anything. And you tell me you're not in the market! Figure it up a minute, and then tell it to me over again."

"See here, Gar-Shaw, I mean. You didn't come down here to hunt for me. There's not a cent in taking me in, and you don't generally work cases of that kind. It won't pay you to face your hand running me in right off the handle, to say nothing of what I would be doing if I saw you was bound to try it on."

"Sense at last, my dear boy."

"And if you are in for making me trouble at the clean-up, all I can do is to kill you before that comes off. I'll take your word for it if you say you didn't come down here for me, and I'll bunch the cards and pull out of the game till you've left. That is as fair as I can offer."

"Oh, but I have come down here to look after you. I'm going to make you an offer, and you are going to accept it."

"You have things fixed, then, so I can't get out of it."

A cold perspiration had broken out on Nippers's forehead, and the cool-headed man watching him knew his nerve was broken.

"That's what."

"Go on with your offer, then," said the other, desperately.

"I have got to hear it, anyhow, and may as well know the worst of it soon as possible."

"A touch of reason at last. This is the way the land lies."

With his right hand in his side-pocket, his left hand produced a gun, which covered the gambler sport, and the latter saw the hammer was drawn back, and that a slight touch meant death for him.

"You knew, of course, that I had you foul, but it is just as well for you to see it. And I want you to remember that—that I have never hesitated to shoot straight in a case of life or death. I never bluff, because I always hold a full hand."

"I know that; drive on with your market wagon! If you say so I'll hold my hands up, if you'll only promise to get it over at a little faster gait."

"Here you have it, then."

"I have it down fine, you want to understand. You are playing stool-pigeon for Captain Hardhand and his gang, and I am after them in a sort of fashion, though I am not ready to round them up as yet. If you want to save yourself from the wreck now is your chance."

"You are way off, there. I don't know Hardhand from a hole in the ground."

"Of course, of course! And I don't care if you do. I don't think even you would care to sell out an old pard, and run your chances that I wouldn't make a clean round-up, or that no one would leak as to how it was tried on. I don't know that I would object much if you were to tell Hardhand that I am onto him. He can be taken care of at any time, and just now conditions are not ripe."

"What the thunder are you driving at, then?"

"Nippers, you want to keep a mighty quiet tongue in your head about what I am going to tell you. You understand?"

"If I don't, it's not for want of being told."

"You have heard of the murder of one Colonel Kerry, of the army. If you haven't it makes no great difference. There is a reward of ten thousand dollars for the arrest of the man who did the deed, and if I succeed all my expenses will be paid."

"I have been close behind him for some time, and knew more about him than he dreamed of. He has come down here to join Captain Hardhand's gang, and I am pretty sure he is there now. I can take him by force any time, but I'll run a big chance of having to kill him to get him, and that would tip the basket over and break all the eggs. He is worth ten thousand living; and not a blamed cent over expenses when dead. That is the reason I want you, and the reason I am going to have you. I'll give you one thousand dollars, and a month's law, the day you help me get him into Scrub Oak, or Walnut Bar with the darpies on."

"And how am I going to help you?" asked Nippers, desperately.

"A thousand dollars ain't much money, but I'd know better than not to help you if I could."

"First off, I want to hear just when he gets to camp, and what he is doing. After that, you can keep me posted as to how he gets along, and I will let you know when I want you for further work. It's a big contract, and I don't see my way clear, even yet."

"And how do you suppose I am going to find all that out?"

"That's not my business. I tell you to do it; and you'll toe the mark, or I'll stop my work long enough to take you back to Ground Hog Gulch. And you know what that means."

"I'll do what I can, and if I don't succeed, crack your whip. That's all."

"And another thing. You have apparently set in to worry Mrs. Marvin. Drop that. She is being taken care of, and you will only get yourself in trouble. When the time comes she will have to go back to stand her trial, but I would sooner she would give herself up than have to take her. Judge Sanford is her brother, and if he set the boys on you, they would stretch your neck in two-seven time. Sabbe?"

Nippers gave a sullen nod, but remained silent.

"See that you behave yourself, then. So long. I'll see you later."

Jackson Shaw thrust away his pistol, nodded carelessly, and strode away. Nippers remained, with closed lips and clinched hand, registering an awful oath.

CHAPTER VII.

NIPPERS MAKES HIS FIRST MOVE.

JUDGE SANFORD was a unique character of his class, and had received the sobriquet of "The Gentleman Sport," in recognition of the way he did business.

There was no question but what he had as many ups and downs as most men, in the course of his extented career.

He came into Red Bend a little after the beginning of the rush, and at that time his fortunes had been at a low ebb. As far as known he had played a square game from the first, and before long luck seemed to take a turn, and he found himself on the high road to prosperity.

One night he hit a streak while playing with a miner sport by the name of Webb—Billy Webb.

First, he won all the cash Billy could muster, and as there was just about enough of

it to make a fair stake, he put it up against a half interest in the Diamond Drill Mine—and won.

Then Billy wanted to go with the game, and have one or the other own the whole thing.

Not a bit of it! The judge told Webb that he was as good a pard as he wanted, and that he was going to stop right there.

This was disgusting to Billy, because that very day he had about concluded his mine was worked out, and it was no use putting any more money or labor into it.

He offered to sell out the other half, but no one would buy, and so he had to stay in, and for pride's sake go on with the work.

The result was, as all Red Bend knew—the big pocket.

The judge, to tell the truth, was about as much surprised as Webb at the find, and had less faith than before in the mine. He made no further investment in mining stock, and put little more money into the Diamond Drill drifts. Work went along there after a fashion which barely paid expenses, and the bulk of his profits was invested in the Big Pocket Saloon, which immediately became the prominent sporting resort in town.

There were a number of other places where money was lost and won, and liquor dispensed, but none of them were as thriving, or had a better class of customers.

As for his sister—Mrs. Marvin had appeared in Red Bend several months before the opening of this story, and had taken charge of the judge's house, with the assistance of a Chinaman, who had providentially turned up at about the same time.

As it was not supposed that she would be recognized by any one in the town, she had taken her brother's name, and though few people there had the pleasure of speaking to her, she was well enough known, and in spite of her retiring ways was rather popular. She was hardly the sort of person to be seen dancing at the Northern Lights dancing hall, and that was about the only place where the male and female sections of the population met on a common ground.

Business at the Big Pocket was brisk that evening, and when the stranger from the Best Chance came lounging in he found both bar and tables doing a rushing business, so was, for a time, overlooked in the crowd.

Somewhat apart from the rest, three men were seated at a small table, engaged in a game of draw.

At a glance, Jackson Shaw recognized one of these men as Vincent Doyle, and drifted in that direction. When he had reached the back of Nippers's chair he halted, and rested one hand lightly on it.

"Nothing new, pard," remarked Nippers, casting a glance back over his shoulder, and smiling as he spoke. "It's just the same old game, where straights go for all they are worth, and a royal flush beats the deck. Sit down and play a hand or two, for love and money."

"There's blamed little love about my playing," was the careless answer of Shaw, who fancied he understood the meaning of the first part of the address, and that it was either an indication that he had thought better of his refusal of the morning, or that it was intended to make him believe so.

"I generally play them for what the traffic will bear, and nine times out of ten get away with the luggage of the other fellows. If you want a chance to judge of the strength of my game, and the other gents don't object, I wouldn't mind passing away the time for an hour or so."

"No one objects here to a man with means, and if you think you can keep up your end, reef right in, and we'll do our level best to show you how the thing ought to be worked."

Shaw smiled a trifle grimly, and took the chair which was offered him by one of the two or three men who had been watching the game. Nippers was gorgeous in purple and fine linen, and as cordial as though this man he was speaking to had not knocked him endways that very morning.

It might be he was itching to earn a thousand dollars; and then again, he might be laying back for a chance to get even. Whichever it was, Jackson Shaw did not seem to have the shadow of a suspicion that there was any chance for foul play; so he took his

seat, threw down a handful of coin at his elbow, and shoved a dollar into the pot.

Then the game went on.

It did not take the other men at the table any great length of time to make up their minds that this stranger was a past-master in the art.

Vincent Doyle had been sure of that, all along. If this was Dan Garland, as he fully believed, whatever he undertook would be done well as the best.

Luck was actually running about even; but there was no mistake about the good judgment displayed by Shaw at every turn in the game. As long as it was square he could hold his own with them all, and perhaps a little more.

Nippers had no confidences, and was in on the strength of his own hand.

He had discovered that the two were playing for each other's interests, and he had an eye to his own when he introduced Jackson Shaw into the game.

Nippers had the game, and after a little preliminary skirmishing, Shaw shoved his cards together, as they lay face downward on the table, ran them hastily over again, stood pat, and laid his hand down squarely in front of him. Any one who had eyes could see that whatever his hand might be, as it lay there, it had come squarely to him. It might be invincible, it might be simply a hand too good to split, or the whole thing might be a simple bluff to take the ante or screen his methods of playing some future deal.

The man on his right saw the ante, called for three cards, and the draw went on.

After that the pot began to swell, and it was plain there were some good hands out.

At Red Bend five hundred dollars was considered a brilliant fortune to be lying on the size of a hand, and that was the amount in the pool when the last man to speak followed the example of the rest and simply came in.

Shaw turned his cards face up, spreading them out a little, and pushing them forward.

They spoke for themselves, and it was not necessary for him to mention that he held a royal flush!

"There's an infernal cheat somewhere!" exclaimed the man on the left, and he flung down his hand, face upward.

"There's two aces of hearts in that deck, and what I want to know is how they got there."

"I might be asking that question myself," answered Shaw, as cool as the coolest. "If we could just decide who got the first one we would be able to guess a little better about the second."

The explosion Nippers was looking for did not come. As he spoke, Jackson Shaw was staring his opponent straight in the eyes. He caught them, fixed them, and held them there as though they were glued to his own!

There was no motion for a weapon; nothing but that cold stare; and yet the man with the ace-full had half sprung to his feet at that first outburst, his hand still holding a half-drawn revolver. In another second as it seemed he would have had Jackson Shaw covered.

The man squirmed a trifle under that steady stare, and sunk back into his seat, while his hand came back to the cards on the table.

"That's all well enough," he grumbled, "but who gets the five hundred?"

"If it will be any accommodation, I'll take it," returned Shaw, with the same inscrutable smile on his lips.

"Or, we'll bunch the cards, shuffle and cut. Then, we'll leave it for a jacker. Or, we'll draw the stakes and jump the game. Oh, I'm the easiest satisfied fellow you ever saw. I'm even open to an engagement for a shooting scrape. But, all the same, Brother Doyle, there, dealt me my hand, and if there are any further questions to be asked you had better turn your attention to him. There's a swindle somewhere, and I'm out as much as any one by it."

Though Nippers had his hand close to his pistol, and was ready to take advantage of the opportunity he had been working for, the opportunity did not come. His first scheme had failed, and Jackson Shaw gave him another of his wintry smiles as the man

who held the ace-full proposed they draw down and start fresh.

But Shaw's mind had changed.

"Excuse me; but, as we're about where we started from, I think I'll jump the game. After slipping up on a dead sure thing like that I don't propose wasting my luck any longer."

"If you mean—" began Doyle.

"I don't mean a blamed thing except what I have said. If you don't like that I'm sorry, and the door is open for a heap of slaughter."

"That's all well enough in its way," interrupted the fourth man, who had as yet remained silent; "but you're forgetting one little point: Doyle and I have a little interest in that same pot, and we are holding hands there's no discount on."

What more he might have said remained unuttered, for, at that instant, the chandelier at the center of the ceiling dropped with a crash, while a long arm reached over Nippers's shoulder, and a hand hastily gathered up the money which still lay in the center.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT.

For a moment Jackson Shaw imagined a general raid was on foot; and yet the fall of the chandelier, to those who saw it, seemed really a *bona fide* accident, caused by a bit of recklessness on the part of a few citizens of the Bend who were rough, yet known to be square enough in spite of that falling.

There were several side lamps, to be sure, and the place was not in darkness, but the trouble was, no one knew what was coming, nor how soon even the lamps would be extinguished. A score of revolvers made their appearance, and the wonder was that shooting did not begin at once.

The Stranger Sport had as quick an eye as any. He saw the arm over the table, swiftly as it moved. He saw, too, that the companion hand held a wicked looking knife, which hung immediately over the shoulders of Vincent Doyle.

There was no time to consider, or to seek for an explanation. His own left hand shot out like an electric flash, and closed on the wrist, just as the thief's fingers tightened on the bundle of notes which had been hastily swept together; then, leaning forward Shaw's hand caught the wrist of the hand which held the knife as it started on its downward way, and a double wrench followed.

Knife and notes dropped, and, to everybody's astonishment, the man himself was swung bodily over the table, and flung with a terrible crash to the floor, while Shaw, springing back, flashed out a pair of revolvers.

"Steady, gents! You are strangers all!" was his warning.

"I am betting only on what I see, and if I have to take care of myself my bull-dogs will talk, mighty quick. What is the meaning of all this, anyhow?"

Nippers looked as though he might know yet said nothing.

His hand darted toward his pistols again, and with the movement one of Shaw's muzzles covered him. If he drew he felt sure the shot would follow; and yet his first impulse was to send a bullet through the brain of the man on the floor.

For him Jackson Shaw had an eye also, but he had counted too much on the effects of that fall, and too little on the nerve and agility of the foiled fellow.

That man, knowing that attention would be called to him, at once made the most of his opportunities. The rest of the room was too much excited over the ruined lights, and the cause of the accident, to pay much attention to what was going on in that corner, so he rolled over suddenly, sprung to his feet, and was away before any one could attempt to stop him.

Shaw did not turn one hand, and had he crooked his finger he at least knew the man would go down. But it seemed to be only a measure of caution, for when he saw the fellow disappear without attempting a movement of offense, the Stranger Sport turned carelessly to the table again.

"There's too much money lying around loose, here. If the frolic is really over we had better count it off and share it around."

The man who sat to his left had gathered

the stakes as they had dropped from the hand of the would-be robber, and, drawing them to his side of the table, had covered them with a revolver, on the hammer of which his thumb rested.

"There's a hoodoo on this game, somehow, and I guess you are right," was his quiet rejoinder.

"Doyle can thank you for his life, though. That coon had it in for him, and if you had not caught his arm when you did his knife would have been in Vince's back. What does it all mean, anyhow?"

"Blamed if you can prove it by me," answered Nippers, to whom the question seemed addressed.

"The poor devil must have been hard up to have run a risk like that, and I reckon he wanted to send me over the range just to make things a little worse mixed, and so give himself a little better chance to get away."

"It may be so; but he's got clean off, and I don't count on it that he will be apt to show his face again at the Big Pocket. We'll get the divy over before he does, anyhow."

While he spoke he was counting over the money of the pool, and found that with the exception of a few pieces of coin which had rolled on the floor, it was all there.

To divide it as it belonged was no great work, for by this time the room was lighted again. That task being finished, the four pushed back from the table and rose up. They would, perhaps, have gone away in different directions had it not been for Nippers.

"One moment, pard," he said, addressing Shaw in a low tone. "I have a word or two of warning, and I may as well say it now."

"Say it then, and don't stretch it over too much ground. I can't say I think much of the Big Pocket, and I don't object to getting out of it as fast as I know how."

"If a little thing like that upsets you, what will it be when they get after you in good earnest? Don't you think you had better pull out for a better climate? Or is all that just a part of the game you are always playing? Blest if I can tell; but the last for choice."

There was a look of scorn on the face of the sport outlaw which would have cut some men to the quick, but it did not appear to effect the feelings of Jackson Shaw.

"Don't be excited about me. I generally arrive on schedule time when I set out to get anywhere."

"So they say. But, that is not what I wanted to talk to you about. I want, in the first place, to thank you for saving my life."

"Oh, come! Don't try to humbug me."

"No; but I mean it. If you had not been quick as a wild cat, the blade would have been in my back. And if the wealth on the table had not been too much for the fellow, it would have been there, anyhow."

"That is encouraging for one who thought of making you his friend. What is it all about, anyhow?"

"About you. How it happened I can only guess; but they must have seen my interview with you this morning, and been wholly mistaken about it. The knife is the reward for a traitor, and they were about to give me the whole length of it on the very first chance."

"I rather thought it was coin he was after," said Shaw, surprised in spite of himself.

"No, you are wrong. It wouldn't be in nature for one of the gang to let slip a chance for a snug little pile like that, and it was well it was so."

"Yes, for if he had stabbed first, and looked after the pot afterwards, you would not have been here to tell me of it."

"And you would not have had a chance to save my life."

"Did I save it? I wish I could be as certain about it as you seem to be. I would know better whether to trust you; for, of course, you have something to tell me, more than you have yet said."

"You need not trust me, for it is not likely you will have much to do with me after to-night. But, what I tell you now, or any other time, will be the truth."

"And the offer I made you this morning will still stand good."

"I will not promise to earn it; but, when

you have hit the turn, and are figuring up expenses, if it strikes you I ought to have a thousand, give it to me. First off, I can tell you that the man you spoke of is in that camp."

"Do you know that to be a fact, or is it only a guess?"

"I know it, because I was told before they suspected me of treachery. It may be I will not be able to give you any more information. Yet, I know some things about the camp, so long as they do not move it, that may be worth your while to hear. When the time comes to put them to practical use let me know, and I will post you up."

"You are certainly more grateful than I believed was in you, or else that thousand dollars is going a great way."

"My safety is going further with me than either. Can't you see, it is my life or theirs? It will be mighty hard to convince them, now, that I am not selling them out. And the penalty for that is death. Therefore, be careful how you address me again. I thought it was less likely any of their spies would be on the watch at present than at another time. If I hear more I will let you know without question of yours."

Nippers spoke like a man who realized the seriousness of his position, and if Jackson Shaw could have forgotten the interview of the morning he would perhaps have believed in his good faith, but the conversation from a deadly enemy to a trusting friend was altogether too rapid to be believed in, though the event of the evening must be something of a puzzle.

He allowed Doyle to go away without a question, and decided in his own mind that this was but the beginning of the plot, and that time alone would show whether it was directed against him or Vincent Doyle.

After such an unpropitious opening of the evening it seemed as though he did not care to tempt fortune. But men were there with whom it was not hard to strike an acquaintance, and he lounged forward and began a conversation which ran along for half an hour without becoming wildly interesting.

Some time before Nippers had taken his departure, and at last Shaw, departing, turned his face toward the Best Chance.

Apparently, he moved without suspicion of danger, but the fact was, he never had his eyes wider open in his life.

It might have been possible to get a shot at him from ambush, but it would not be a near enough covert to insure certain work; and for open attack he was ready.

Before going far he saw that he was followed; but the spy kept at a respectable distance, and seemed bent only upon learning whither he was going.

At the door of the Best Chance, Shaw halted for a moment, and looked dubiously up and down the street, as though uncertain; but finally appeared to decide that he might as well retire for the night. So he entered leisurely, and made his way toward his room.

The spy closed up rapidly, and was under the open window when the door of Shaw's room closed; and listening, he heard a low creak from the bedstead, as the occupant of the room cast himself upon it.

That seemed to be what the scout was waiting for. He turned, and hurried away.

At the outskirts of the town he halted, and some shadows lurking there rose up to meet him.

"It's all right, Woolly!" he exclaimed.

"He is bunked in at the Best Chance, and if there was any virtue in that last drink he's sound asleep and snoring."

CHAPTER IX.

A WOMAN WITH NERVE.

THE foremost of the three lurkers began a growl but as suddenly cut it short. There was a quick interruption.

"No names, Dandy, or there will be some one else asleep. If this is straight goods it's good enough; but it's not always a dead level for the chickens when the weasel is snoring."

"An' who the thunder be you?" demanded Dandy, with a suspicious stare at the speaker.

It certainly was not the person whom he had intended to address, though the name

by which he was usually addressed was known to him.

"Never mind that. I've got a say-so in the running of things, and I'm merely giving you a warning that might have to come butt-end foremost at a less convenient season. Pard, here, will say it's all according to Gunter, and that I represent the boss in this affair."

"He's right," echoed another of the party, whose voice could easily be recognized by one familiar with it as belonging to Woolly himself. "Your line now are ter go back, an' keep both peepers open wider ner ever. Ef he keeps on sleepin' ther sleep ov ther righteous, good ernough. Ef he comes promernadin' round in his night clothes you wants ter drop him ef you kin. An' ef you ain't able fer him, let off two shots quick ez you kin, an' then skin out. Slide erlong, now, an' git yerself on ther watch. What we wanted ter know war ef he got ther dose. Ef thar's ary mistake about that, speak up now, er look out fur snags in the sweet by an' bye."

"You kin tell better ner I kin how ther dose'll work; but I'll swear he got it. I seen it go inter his glass along with three fingers ov benzine that war thar, an' I seen him set ther glass down empty. Ef thar war ary shenanigin he's a better juggler than I think lies onder his wool. An' ef thar should be ary mistake I'll set it right. Sabbe?"

"It's yer own awful reesk, then. Ef thar's a slip an' he don't down yer we will. Yer can't be too pe'rtickler dealin' with a bloodhound like him."

The spy shrugged his shoulders and went away. He knew who he was supposed to be dealing with, and that there were risks to be run beyond the average, and it was not exactly the square thing to attempt to break his nerve.

When he came back to the Best Chance things appeared to be in the shape in which he had left them, save that the town was largely silent. Here and there the lights of the gaming-houses shone upon the street, and the shouting of some belated revelers could be heard; but the larger portion of the inhabitants had gone to the land of dreams, and those who were abroad the spy was ready to meet.

That Jackson Shaw had not deserted his quarters the spy made himself reasonably sure. Unless he was all mistaken he heard through the open window the sounds of deep breathing. Having heard that, he drew back a little distance, and throwing himself down watched alternately door and window, certain that the bugbear could not emerge from his den without being seen.

The Big Pocket Saloon was quiet, but not by any means deserted. In fact, business there had just settled down to steady work, and it was not likely the place would be closed for an hour or two. Indeed when there was the profitable run of custom which often came along it remained open till day-break, with the judge in the chair.

In the early part of the evening men in plenty came and went, but as the night advanced those left were mostly stayers, who only came out when the assembly was broken up for the night.

For this reason the men from the outskirts went their way after Dandy had departed, without much fear of attracting any attention. Even if they were seen they would not be interfered with; but it was pretty reasonable for them to believe that they could reach their destination without attracting attention at all.

And that destination was the residence of Judge Sanford.

There was no doubt but that the judge was at the Big Pocket, and would stay there, and there was an open way to his residence, though it did not stand far from the saloon.

It was one of the best houses in the town, though that was not saying much. For the most part shanties of the rudest description were good enough for the inhabitants; but the judge, after he had furnished his saloon had expended considerable on a residence which was as good-looking outwardly as the best, and inside was furnished and finished a great deal better.

To the original house an ell had been added, and the two buildings had been so divided as to make good sized rooms, while

above were several attics, one of which was occupied by Hop Ling, the Chinaman before mentioned.

The prowlers came up to this house from the rear, and halted while they surveyed the prospect, and one of them muttered:

"If we could have got in our work here after the same fashion we did or suppose we did, at the saloon, it would have been a great deal better; but, all the same, we can work the trick without danger, and with very little chance for a racket."

"I reckon ye'r right 'bout ther danger; but I wouldn't like ter say much 'bout ther racket. It makes a feller feel bad ter slip up too awful much when he tries ter be a prophet; an' ef a woman once opens her mouth she kin purty nigh wake ther dead."

"That's so; and all the more reason why she should not be allowed to open her mouth. But, open or shut, she must not be croaked unless it is a dead sure thing we have got beforehand the things we came for. Now then, to see if things are as they ought to be."

Evidently everything had been planned beforehand, for no further time was wasted. Two of the party remained on the watch, carefully screening themselves, from observation, in case there should be any passers, while the others stole silently to the door.

A quiet trail showed the door was locked, but that offered no great obstacle to their further advance.

"Kin you work it, Cherry?" asked the apparent leader in the movement; and while he was yet speaking, the answer came in the shape of a low click of the lock, which had already been picked.

Carefully watching against a creak the door was forced slowly open, and with muffled feet, and light steps, the midnight marauders stole in.

They went about the work very much like old hands. The room they were in was a kitchen, and did not offer much inducement for investigation.

Cherry, or Cherry Bite as the name was generally called—for the reader has doubtless recognized the party as belonging to the hill outlaws—produced a small lantern, and opening the slide flashed the light carefully around.

By so doing it was seen there was no furniture in the way to the door at the opposite side of the kitchen, and to that they made their way.

The door proved to be fastened with a bolt on the inside, but that was not to detain them long. A short, iron "jimmy" was inserted in the crack, about where the bolt appeared to be, and a gentle pressure did the rest.

The staple flew out, and, as the latch was raised, the door swung open with very little noise.

Again the lantern was used.

This time they were in a dining-room, and though it was well furnished for a house in Red Bend it did not seem to contain anything which would likely be a receptacle of valuables, unless there was silver in the side-board.

That, however, Cherry Bite gave a brief inspection, and a glance at the interior showed it to contain nothing which a well-regulated burglar would care to waste strength in carrying off.

At the further side of the dining-room were two doors, evidently opening into separate apartments in the front part of the building. Toward the one to the right the leader started, but was halted by a touch on the shoulder, and a whispered word or so from Cherry Bite.

"Steady, Woolly! That is her room, and like as not we can't get in without noise enough to waken her. Better try it from the judge's side. The chances are the door between her room and his is not fastened; and if we are to get the papers they will be in his safe, more than likely."

Without a word of reply Woolly turned in that direction; and the same successful tactics were employed to force the door to the left.

The ground was getting warmer, and they lingered a moment, listening.

No sign was there, that they had raised an alarm, and so they stole into the room of the judge.

Without the lantern the darkness in the room would have been utter.

There were close shutters, no light entered from the door they left open behind them.

But the intruders knew the general contents well enough, and the instant the slide of the lantern was opened the streak of light fell upon a small but stout looking safe.

Now, while it was natural to suppose that a safe of that kind would not yield to anything short of a regular siege, there was a chance, such as is sometimes met with in the affairs of the most prudent, that something could be done without much delay, and they advanced to it at once.

Cherry Bite held the lantern so as to throw its light on the lock, and at that Woolly stared, never touching it with his finger, until he was sure he understood thoroughly everything connected with the face of it.

And somewhat to his surprise he saw that the index on the dial pointed almost to the zero. It might be the knob had not been turned at all!

Cautiously he tugged at the door, and it swung slowly open, with only a slight jolt of the bolt, which had not been shot.

There were places in the safe for account books of moderate size, two little money drawers in which the keys were sticking, and several pigeon holes in which there were bundles of letters and papers.

Cherry Bite could hardly suppress an exclamation of exultation.

This was better luck than had been looked for. With a rapidity and precision which seemed strange in one of his rough appearance Woolly caught up package after package of papers and ran hastily through them until he came to an envelope which attracted his attention.

The contents were a key and a small strip of paper, partly printed and partly written.

He held them up with an air of triumph; and at that very moment they heard a sharp click, while a woman's voice exclaimed:

"Drop that, you scoundrel, or I fire!"

CHAPTER X.

JACKSON SHAW AT THE FRONT.

The proceedings of the burglars had not been according to the original plan, but the finding of the safe door unlocked had been too much for them, and they had even neglected to try whether the door to the next room was fast.

The consequence was, a complete surprise.

Carefully as they had worked, they had aroused the occupant of the adjoining room, who, of course, was the Mrs. Marvin whom Nippers had interviewed that morning. The door had not even been tightly closed, and without the least noise she had swung it open and now stood upon the threshold, with her revolver pointing straight at Woolly, whose figure was in part disclosed by the glare of the lantern.

Thorough as was the surprise the intruders were not confounded as much as might have been supposed.

Cherry Bite closed the lantern with a snap, and Woolly West, still clutching key and paper, threw himself upon the floor.

An instant later the pistol cracked; but the bullet went wild. In the darkness a man sprung upon Mrs. Marvin with a bound like that of a tiger, and knocking up her pistol-hand with one arm, with the other clasped her around the waist.

"Help me gag her, quick, pard! I hew her, but she'll yowl like a catamount if we don't fix her quick."

Woolly and Cherry Bite were already on the way. The sound of a pistol-shot would be deadened to outsiders, and would not be apt to attract attention, but the scream of a woman would be heard by some one, even at the hour of midnight.

Mrs. Marvin struggled fiercely for a moment, but it was no use.

The fact was, she had been taken by surprise herself, and had no opportunity to use her strength to any advantage. She was wrested from her feet, bound and gagged, and most thoroughly made a prisoner in the briefest possible space of time.

"Good ernough!" exclaimed Woolly, drawing a long breath. "So fur, so good. We must git a move on, now. That shot may rouse a ho'nets' nest yit."

"Ye'r' through hyer, be ye, then?" asked the man, who had made the original capture.

"Yes. We have everything we come fur. Ef holders kin only be keepers we got all we want, an' ef we kin git out ov Red Bend without a picnic I ain't askin' fur anything better."

As he spoke Woolly touched his pocket from the outside to make sure key and paper were where he had thrust them when he rolled away from the threatened shot; and he felt they were still there.

Cherry Bite showed the way with the lantern, and carrying the woman between them they stole through the dining room. From there the way was reasonably sure by means of the light which entered through the windows, and the open door of the kitchen, so that the dark lantern was again closed.

As they reached the outside door the party halted for a moment to take a view of the grounds before venturing out, though with the sentinels they had placed to give the alarm it was not likely there was any one approaching.

At that moment, with a perfectly noiseless tread, a shadow glided toward them, brushed by them, touching Woolly West lightly as it passed, and, darting through the open door, uttered a terrific screech!

The one yell was loud enough to reach to the Big Pocket Saloon, and, in fact, to wake half the town. After that there was nothing to be heard but the light rustle of footsteps as the apparition darted away around the nearest corner of the kitchen.

"It's ther infernal Hop Ling!" exclaimed Woolly, pausing, pistol in hand, before he had gone half a dozen steps. "But, he's got good away, an' thar ain't no use ter linger. When he begins ter whoop erg'in hell hev all Red Bend hyer. We want ter git lively fur ther hosses. Ontil we reach 'em we're in a heap ov danger."

Again he led the way, striking toward the sentinel whom he could dimly see standing at the spot where he had been posted. The picket from the other side of the house had already joined them, having been thoroughly startled by the appearance of the fugitive Chinaman, at whom he did not care to risk a snap shot, lest he might make the confusion worse confounded.

At the same instant the sentinel began a move toward them, looking back over his shoulder as though he scented danger from that direction.

Before the party had got any great distance from the house the man had reached them.

Then, there was a revelation.

With a straight forward blow he felled Woolly West to the ground, and followed it up by rainng strokes at the others as fast as they came within distance. Left and right he struck, with the regularity of a piston-rod, and the force of a pile-driver.

The attack was so unexpected and so ferocious that the work was done before a shot could be fired. Some little show of resistance there was, but before it could amount to anything the time for it had passed. The assailant snatched Mrs. Marvin from the ground where she had dropped, and sprung to and into the house.

The door slammed to behind them, a bolt which he seemed to find by instinct was shot, and hastily yet with certain fingers he released the lady from her bonds.

Then, he sprung to the window, and took a view of the scene.

Even yet the party had not recovered from the demoralization of the attack, and were only clustering together to take counsel. They did not seem to anticipate any danger, and only a hasty glance was now and then given toward the house. They were waiting the word of Woolly, but he was not yet in condition to speak.

Mrs. Marvin had all along retained her coolness, and when she had stretched her arms, and passed her hand over her brow, she stepped lightly to the side of her rescuer.

"Madam," said the man, "I had the pleasure of coming to your assistance once before to day, and perhaps I played too lightly, though Vince Doyle is not in that gang. Say the word, and if they make an attack I will kill them all."

"No, no! for Heaven sake no!" was her exclamation. "Certainly you can beat

them off without proceeding to that extreme and sooner than see such wild work I would deliver myself into their hands. I know what it is they want, and I could buy my release if the worst came to the worst."

"Shall I take them in, then? It's not just the best light for delicate shooting, but I reckon I could wing the lot, so there would not be much danger of their being too far gone for a necktie party when the boys got here. Speak quick, for I think I hear them coming now."

"No, no! Tell them to go. They will understand better from you than from me if I spoke to them. Quick, or it may be too late!"

"You want them to get away, then," muttered Shaw, as he coolly threw open the door.

"Then, in a clear, ringing tone:

"Flag of truce for a moment, gents! After that you can have your choice. The lady don't want wholesale slaughter, and I am inclined to gratify her if it can be safely done. Actually, I suppose it is my duty to take you all in, but I never like to get switched off onto a side issue. The gang is coming from the Big Pocket, however, and when the judge gets in sight he will begin to shoot. Do you want to fight, or run? One minute from now the choice will not be open."

"We'll run now, dog-gone ye!" called back Woolly West; "but I reckon it's a fight to a finish betwixt us an' you, Dan Garland, and afore we git through it'll be you ez goes up ther flume. Scatter, boys. Hyer they come!" and with a quick turn of the hand he aimed the muzzle of his pistol toward the man in the doorway, and pulled the trigger.

The motion was well intended but it was made against one who had an eye like an eagle's, and who was looking out for just that thing. With the turn of Woolly's wrist Jackson Shaw stepped carelessly but quickly to one side, and was screened by the wall, while the bullet hurtled harmlessly over the very spot where he had been standing.

The outlaws were in full retreat, and Shaw stood in the doorway, with his revolver ready, but forbearing to fire.

As he had said, a gang from the Big Pocket was on the way, and had already caught sight of the fugitives, and had deflected accordingly.

Mrs. Marvin placed her hand on the shoulder of the man who had saved her.

"He called you Dan Garland. Certainly you are not the great detective—that cannot be your name."

"No more than it is yours," was the prompt answer.

"And yet, how does it come that you are here, so prompt to the rescue? What manner of man are you that you could offer to murder them all, if it be not in the line of your business?"

"Excuse me, but they don't call such things murder. When such men as they make an attack most persons believe it must be a duel to the death, with the chances all on their side. Few would have been willing to hold their hand, especially after the taste they attempted to give me of their quality; and which was, in fact, the cause that brought me here."

"I do not understand."

"Probably not, for, from all I have heard, the judge is square enough, and has nothing in for me; but there was an attempt made at the Big Pocket to either poison or drug me; and naturally, after throwing them off the track, I set out to find what it meant."

"And that brought you here?"

"It seemed to. I struck a gang of marauders, if their looks did not belie them, and followed them hither. They posted their sentinels, and it took some little time to get around the fellow at the rear of the house, or I would have made my appearance sooner. About the time I had crept up and knocked him endways they made their reappearance, and you know the rest. I will not deny that I know your name, but the knowledge came to me quite incidentally. I am at all times at your service, but I do not wish to intrude. When you need me again I will probably know of it. I wish you a very good evening."

And tipping his hat with a grace which Mrs. Marvin could not help but see was courtly, he walked away.

CHAPTER XI.

A VOICE FROM THE DARKNESS.

THE outlaws moved with marvelous celerity, and though the men from the Big Pocket Saloon caught sight of them just after they began their retreat, the view was rather a fleeting one, and the pursuers were dropped completely out of sight the moment afterward, when they made their first dodge.

And strange as it might seem, they appeared to have utterly and mysteriously vanished. It was not for a moment doubted that they left the town at once; but by what route they went was a puzzle.

Judge Sanford was the first one to drop out of the chase. In the flurry caused by the view halloo he was, so to speak, carried off his feet, but before he had gone many yards he left the pursuit in what he considered able hands, and made his way to his own domicile.

When he reached the house he went straight to the front door, which he opened after using the key which he carried.

There was a light in his room, and Mrs. Marvin was seated there, her face clasped in her hands, and her elbows resting on the table, at which she was seated in such a manner as to face the door.

She could also watch the open safe, but that was an occupation hardly worth while since the last visit.

"You are safe, Stella!" the judge exclaimed, as he saw the lady seated there.

"At first I was afraid they had got away with you, and joined in the rush. As soon as I knew they had no prisoners I dropped out. I was mighty much afraid, too, of what I might find here. If Hop Ling had not made quarter horse time I guess we would have been too late. How did they come to take you so far off your guard that you could not give an alarm?"

"I was not exactly taken off my guard. They came so quietly that I did not hear them until they were in the room, but I might even then have given the signal as agreed upon had I so chosen, and been none the worse off."

"Why in the name of all that's holy didn't you do it? I have told you all along that it was going to be a fight to a finish, and that you didn't want to throw away a point in the game. Had you given the signal, we might have stood some show of taking them, and that would have been just so many cards out of his hand—and good ones at that."

"If I had only been sure," answered Mrs. Marvin, with something like a wail in her voice.

"But I cannot, dare not shoot till I know who my weapon is turned against; and feeling that way, they have taken the first trick. I might have stopped it, for I had the thief covered; but I waited to be sure, and then, it was too late."

For the first time the judge seemed to see the open door of the safe.

"You do not mean to say that they actually succeeded in opening it before you came on the ground? That they found the only things there which would be apt to interest them?"

That is just what I mean to say. One of the ruffians held in his hand the key and the receipt. I had him under my muzzle, but I wanted to give him a chance for his life. Before he could answer my challenge one of his companions, whom I had not even seen attacked me, and though one shot was fired I was securely their prisoner before I had time to recognize what was happening."

"And they took things as they found them, and thought they had got to the bottom of the secret, and were safe for the missing half million? I must say, Stella, you were wiser than I. I would never have thought of such a plant."

"Yes. They seemed to understand what it meant, and it will divert attention from the real spot for a while, for of course it will take some time for them to learn that it is not there. And yet, it will work against my interests, since it will take Harold into danger, and at the same time away from where I might be able to reach him."

"Never mind that. It would not have helped matters a bit if you had been carried away. How did you escape?"

"That is the singular part of it. One man came to my rescue, and scattered them—perhaps half a dozen of them—with an apparent effort; and then offered to kill them all. Had I said yes, I verily believe he would have done it."

"One man, you say?"

"Yes, one; but he was a lion. They suspected he was Dan Garland, the detective, but he denied the name; and they must have been wrong."

"Dan Garland! What could have led them to believe that unless it was so? I hope they are wrong. The detective is like a two-edged sword. Yet, nothing is more likely. Does this man know you?"

"I am sorry to say, he does; yet, he has offered his services, and this is not the first time he has come to my aid."

"There is something strange about that. Who is he? Where did you meet him before?"

The judge spoke anxiously. As yet, Stella had told him nothing in regard to the meeting with Vincent Doyle, or the way it was terminated. And even now she hesitated to speak of it. No true woman cares to mention past embarrassments, or insult, and had it not been for this later development the history of Doyle's insolence doubtless would have remained untold.

In a few words, then, she explained; and in doing so gave the name of the stranger, as he had declared it to be.

"I might have thought of it," was Sanford's exclamation, "for this is the man who came to the Best Chance yesterday. He was at the Pocket early in the evening and had some sort of trouble, though I did not get on to exactly what it was. It might be Garland. If it is, I am afraid he is after you."

"No. If it is Dan he is not after me; of that I am positively certain. He may be a detective, but to me he looks more like a sport. I should have thought you would know something about him. You must learn what he is after, and we must play our hand accordingly."

The judge looked up hastily.

He had left the door open when he entered, and now there came in the sounds of riot and war.

It was not likely that at this late hour of the night anything had been started which did not have a bearing on the occurrence at his house.

"Sounds as though they were at it again. Guess I will have to leave you, but it's safe to gamble you are in no more danger, for this night at least. If anything does turn up don't wait quite so long to make up your mind. That idea of Marvin being alive is all stuff and nonsense, and if he was you don't want to hold your hand. He won't do it for you and it looks very much as though it would have to be a fight to the finish."

The judge shrugged his shoulders, rose to his feet, and then waited with reluctance. His sister was not done with him.

"No, no! Cannot you see? It is life or death with me to prove that he is living here, and now. If I were sure even that it could be done, and that I no longer need fear, do you think I could risk the possibility of harming him to death? Whatever may come to him it must not be through my hands."

"And after all, you are not sure that he is still living?"

Sanford had passed through a varied experience in the course of his contact with the world; and he had not much respect for any idea or principle which interfered with the law of self-preservation. In any case he preferred to shoot a trifle before the other fellow; and it seemed natural for others to feel the same way.

"He is living. He must be living. Have I not traced that woman to this very neighborhood? What else would have brought her here? He is somewhere near, and this attack—the thing we predicted—proves it. On her own account she would never dare. Do not dare to lift your own hand against him, unless to save life. By doing it you would destroy my last chance."

"Upon my soul, I believe you care for him yet! The infernal scoundrel! Do you suppose that, if I had known he was living, and where to place my hand on him I would not have been on the war-path long ago?"

"And that is what I feared. I could not believe he was dead, though all the world said he was; and half of it was sure I had helped him over the range. When I vanished they thought I had fled from justice, while I was only trailing him down from the slight clue chance had given me. They think he was bankrupt, and that I had his little remnant as well as my own thousands. I know he had his own filchings, and wanted to rob me of mine—to spend it all with her."

"It's a very pretty quarrel you have with the world, my dear; and if they found out you had a brother in Red Bend, they would be apt to be searching for you here. Dan Garland is about the kind of a man to have a bit of information like that salted away, and if there is any truth in what we have heard, he is somewhere on the ground. I don't want to lose you, but, if you want a bit of honest advice, I should say you had better skip by the light of the moon."

"No, no!"

"Yes, yes! You have enough for traveling expenses about you, and if you need it, I can give you a thousand or two. Life can be made comfortable that way for a year or so, until this thing has blown over. Then, you can come back, lift your little half-million, and enjoy life way up to the nines. If you don't get a move on, Garland will have you in spite of care and disguise, and hang you, innocent though you are. And the next week Marvin would come back and administer on your effects—after he had taken advantage of a petition in bankruptcy."

"Do not fear it. Let me tell you what I would have kept secret as part of our arrangement. Dan Garland is my man!"

"Glad ter hear it, old gal!" chuckled a voice from the open door, low, yet distinctly audible.

Instantly Sanford wheeled, and as he did so his pistol sprung to his hand, and he fired straight in the direction of the sound.

He might have saved himself the waste. When he reached the door there was no one in sight, and the bullet had left no mark, but had whistled harmlessly out into the open air.

"The fight is joined, my dear," he said, looking back at the startled woman. "I would advise you to lock the door, and sleep with your revolver in your hand. No one knows how soon they will be back. I'll go over to the Best Chance and see what has happened. Looks as though the villains had got away with the town."

CHAPTER XII.

ROUGH ROADS.

The judge found things quiet at the saloon. In fact, they were almost too quiet, for the game was closed, and there were only a few loungers who were sleepily discussing the late events, and wondering what they all meant.

They had a good deal of information, however, and few questions startled them. What they said it is not worth while to repeat, since the substance of it can better be learned by following more directly the fortunes of Jackson Shaw.

When he bid Mrs. Marvin good-night, and started to make his way to the Best Chance, he had every reason to believe the outlaws had left the town, and that, unless Nippers and some of his friends took a hand in, the way to the hotel was perfectly clear.

His path had been crossed by the men from the saloon, and over-run by those who came from other parts of the camp. He did not for a moment suppose there was the slightest chance of an attack upon himself, and might have been pardoned for carelessness under the circumstances.

But, Jackson Shaw was not careless, and after his first experience he was not the man to be taken off his guard. He strolled along without more than a glance to this side and that, and yet he was quick enough to drop at a flash, with nothing more seriously wrong than a bullet hole in his hat.

As he touched the ground he thrust his revolver forward, and peered in the direction whence had come the shot.

At that there was another report from his rear, and a bullet plunged uncomfortably near. Probably the two men had intended to

fire almost together, and the quickness with which he had dodged disconcerted this second marksman.

Shaw thanked himself for an instinctive caution which had caused him to deflect slightly from the direct course, and so taken him somewhat further away from the spot where these men lay in ambush.

Both men were on the ground, now, like himself, and in that light shooting was uncertain. Shaw suddenly sprung to his feet and dashed forward. He was after the fellow who had first fired, recognizing the fact that he would most likely be the leading spirit of the two.

Another shot came, but for some reason this went wild, and at the flash the Stranger Sport, as we may still call him, fired his own weapon, though he did not have even a glimpse of the man.

A little exclamation of pain followed; then the fellow in turn bounded up, and fled away. He had strength enough to show that he had sustained no serious damage. Another man might have tried to bring him down by a shot, since he could be dangerous enough if cornered, but Shaw thrust away his pistol and put on an extra pressure of steam. He was sure he could overtake him; and he wanted a prisoner, rather than a dead man, on his hands. He was rapidly overhauling his man, when, suddenly, his foot dropped into a hole in the ground, and he gave a great, blundering stumble, which nearly brought him to the ground, and which centered all his attention on himself.

It seemed but momentary, yet, when he looked around again, nothing was to be seen of either man; and though he beat the ground for some time no further traces of them were to be found.

But, at least, the attack had been defeated; and giving up the quest the Stranger Sport once more started for the hotel, which he reached without further adventure.

"I've been doing a heap for the rest of the world," he thought as again he threw himself upon his bed. "If this keeps up much longer all the shooters and fighters in this region will be coming my way in search of fun, and I'll have no time to look after my own affairs. I think that, to-morrow, I will begin on the something else that brought me here."

It argued a good deal of confidence in his luck that he should close his eyes, and more yet for his nerves that he should almost immediately fall into a sound slumber. Some men might have lain awake thinking over what had happened that evening, and more, perhaps, would have pondered over what might possibly come; but neither of the two subjects gave any trouble when he had once resolutely put them out of his mind. When he opened his eyes again the morrow had arrived.

The Stranger Sport was not a particularly early riser at best, unless he had business on hand. As he had laid out no especial hour for beginning the duties of the day, and had been losing considerable sleep of late, it was a very even thing of it that he got any breakfast at all.

He threw himself on the mercy of Solly Bowers, however, and that worthy did not desert him. The bacon was cool, and the coffee was chilly, but he succeeded in making a fairly bountiful meal, and being thus braced for the labors of the hour he went out to interview the landlord once more.

"I'm after a bit of information, old man; and after that I want a trifle of assistance. Perhaps I had better get your assistance first. Is there any way, for love or money, to get the use for a day or so of a fairly decent horse?"

"A blamed slim one," answered Solly. "Ef you kin put up ther stamps ter pay fur him ef some'n keeps yer from ever comin' back, Si Edwards might let yer hav ther loan of hisen, pervised yer war willin' ter pay up right well. Si hez a broken leg, an' I don't reckon he'll be usin' ther beast fur a while ter come yit."

"That suits me to a charm, and if you'll send some one along to show me where the aforesaid Si hangs out at I'll pay him too. Next, I want to find out whether you know anything about an old mine that used to be called the Little Giant?"

Solly gave a whistle of surprise.

"Yer couldn't 'a' come ter a man in this hyer burg ez kin tell yer more about it than me. Fact are, I doubt ef thar are one man in five ez kin tell yer anything at all about it."

"That is odd. I thought it was a pretty well known property, the location of which most any one could assure me of."

"Reckon you're clean behind ther age. Time war when the name war well ernuf known, but it's hed two names sence then, ez I know ov; an' it wouldn't be s'prisin' ef it hed half a dozen."

"Changed hands pretty often, has it?"

"Right smart often, considerin'. It's what are called ther Big Pocket now—same name ez ther s'lloon, an' ther jedge owns a half-interest in it. When he won his sheer frum Billy Webb it war called ther Diamond Drill."

"Not very much of a mine, I take it," remarked the sport, carelessly. "These properties that keep changing their names seldom are."

"Oh, it war good ez they usu'lly find 'em along in ther start, but, ther lead petered out, an' Billy couldn't make grub outer it when he had ther big game with Sanford. He'd 'a' sold it then fur fifty dollars an' welcome, though ther hole in ther ground war wu'th that, jest ter look at."

"The judge must have been fond of putting up good money."

"Oh, ov course; everybody thought he had played it purty low down on ther Gentleman Sport, but that same war layin' back on his luck; an' mighty good luck he found it, too. They hit the big pocket ther name tells about, and sence then ain't bin puttin' much work er coin inter ther mine."

"That must be the place I am after," assumed Shaw, reflectively. "Can you give me directions so that I can find it myself, or will I have to get a guide to show me the way?"

"'Pends on what sorter a head you got fur sich things. Wouldn't be hard fur some strangers ter find Billy Webb's shack ef they war told whar it war; and after that they could go on ter ther hole in ther ground, er git Billy hisself ter show it. Don't think he'd keer much ef you'd tell him yer counted on jumpin' it."

That seemed to be satisfactory to the stranger, who answered that he thought he could find his way around from directions as well as the next man, and that he wanted to lose no time in making his arrangements and getting under way.

Si Edwards turned out to be open to reason, and his horse was by no means a bad looking animal.

"I've lost one since I came into this region, but I don't propose to lose another. Still, as there seems to be no telling, Solly will have the collateral, and if I don't turn up within a week he can consider we are both at the other end of the flume, and be governed accordingly. It is the unexpected which sometimes happens."

With this as a farewell to Si, he strode out to the horse, threw himself into the saddle, and being already prepared with what seemed to be ample directions, set out in search of what was now known as the Big Pocket Mine.

The old Diamond Drill was several miles from the town. The route to it was one which seemed to be entirely unfamiliar, as it lay at right angles to the one by which he had entered Red Bend.

Part of the way the road ran along the river, and the further he went the more deserted and desolate did the region look. It had all been prospected over at one time, and then the indications were favorable; but now it had been about decided that there had never been very much gold there, and what there had been had been pretty well-worked out.

The sport surveyed things with a keen eye. He looked this way and that, though at a little distance no one would have observed the fact, and it might have been thought he was a careless lounging, riding for his health.

When he came to the dam of which the landlord had spoken he dismounted, and hitching his horse strolled down to the breast of it, and stood looking at the thin

sheet of water which was falling into the deep pools below.

It would have been hard to tell from his actions whether he had any particular object in view; for though his gaze was fixed on the water it was not with any intense scrutiny, and his thoughts appeared to be far away.

And yet, it was possible he had some object in mind which might be worth the discovery, for some half dozen men, who had crept toward him when he left the trail, had halted when he halted, and were watching him with intense curiosity.

Side by side in the party were Woolly West, and Red-Hot Rube, the royal rustler.

If they expected to make a discovery they seemed doomed to disappointment, for finally, after some moments of thought, Shaw waved his hand simply with the gesture of one who has made up his mind on some knotty question, and then wheeled to return to the trail.

At that moment the six rose up, each with a revolver leveled, and Red-Hot Rube shouted:

"Han's up, Mister Man! Don't yer stir elsewise, fur ef yer do we're bound ter drill yer."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHOT FROM THE HILLSIDE.

THE movement of the lurkers appeared to be a perfect surprise, and yet the object of the attack was not caught napping.

He wheeled at once, and darted back toward the river.

The movement seemed to disconcert the gang, who had expected resistance, if not surrender. At least, Red-Hot Rube was the only one who was ready immediately to act upon the emergency.

He sprung forward with a bound every whit as swift as that of the seeming fugitive, and was covering the distance between them after a fashion which showed, unless indications lied, he would soon overtake him.

At any rate, the five were rapidly left behind, though they still toiled on in his wake, nervously fingering their revolvers. Had not Rube been between them and their prey there is little doubt but they would have tried some snap-shooting as they ran.

As it was, it seemed too much of a risk. They would be a great deal more likely to hit Rube than Jackson, and until the case was more desperate they did not care to run that risk.

"Cuss him, why don't he shoot?" exclaimed Woolly West, half raising his weapon.

"Soon ez we git ter ther level ground, spread off, an' ther fu'st man that gets a openin' fur a bead wantster let drive. Thar's no foolishness 'bout this game. Ef he warn't onto it afore, Dan Garland'll be thar now."

The advice was good, but at this moment the two men put on a spurt, and though Rube held his own, and was but a few feet behind, yet the gap was one which remained in spite of every exertion.

They heard him call: "Halt thar! We want yer alive; but ef we can't git yer that-a-ways, we'll hev her cold, dog-gone yer!"

He had his pistol at a ready, and as he spoke he threw it up to cover the man in the advance.

They were close by the river side, and ahead of them the road roughened. The fugitive seemed to realize his dangers, and to lose heart. He turned swiftly aside, and running out on a tree which overhung the river, flung himself headlong into the water, just as the sharp report of the pistol in the hands of Red-Hot Rube sounded along the stream.

The others were coming rapidly but Rube did not wait for them. He ran along the bank, looking downward into the water, which here flowed a dozen feet below him.

For the moment the rest were shut off from view of the stream, but more than once they saw the hand of the rustler raise as though he was about to aim at some object; and as often it fell back to his side, while his face bore an expression of disgust.

Near the head of the dam the waters took a swirl, and swept out toward where they fell over the dam; and suddenly he once more threw up his hand, this time firing at an object that was for the instant visible,

balancing itself on the breast. The outlaws in the rear had a glimpse of it, and that was all. Then it disappeared.

"I've got him this time! I'll swear I go him!" shouted Rube in exultation.

"Git a russet on, an' we kin pick his corpus out, down below. I want ter be sure this are ther Simon-pure Dan, an' then I kin sleep easy ag'in."

The task of scrambling down was not as easy as it might have been, and took some time.

Below the dam it would be almost impossible to crawl out on the other side, so that this was the one to watch, in case there was any mistake about the fate of the late fugitive.

There was no sign, however, of his having left the water, nor was there anybody to be seen in the stream. Possibly it was lying at the bottom under the deep water at the foot of the fall, and if so there was no one there who would care to venture into that boiling current for the purpose of recovering it.

On the other hand, it was not altogether certain that he had not taken the fall in comparative safety, and then made his way on down the river. Rube himself admitted that view of the case since he did not linger long.

"This way! Ef he gits off now we d'serve what we git—an' he hez ther pluck ter make a mighty hard fight. Thar! Ain't that him now?"

He pointed down the stream, and rushed wildly forward, followed by the rest. It was like a pack of starving wolves with the blood-scent in their nostrils, and the prey escaping.

Nothing was to be found of the missing body, though they not only searched the shore, but watched the stream for a distance that made it impossible for them not to have reached the utmost limit he could have made.

After assuring themselves of that, they turned back, and went over the ground carefully on their return, following it up to the spot where Jackson Shaw had taken to the water.

"Right thar are whar he dumped hisself, an' I follered him after he kim to ther top, an' give him a cold pill ez he went over. Oh, thar can't be ary doubt about his going over ther brink, an' ef he did he's a dead 'un now. Ef I on'y knowed what he's bin a sayin' at Red Bend!"

"Ef yer did what would yer be doin'?" asked Woolly, looking keenly at the rustler.

"Dan kin keep a still tongue in his head; but ef he war spreadin' hisself thar's no tellin' what he might 'a' let out. Ef he give away the fact that thar war a mighty nice pile ter be made ropin' Red-Hot Rube, thar's jest ernuf fools in that thar town ter try ter make it. An' honest, boyees, I'm tired ov slaughter."

"Clear ez mud," growled Woolly.

"Don't reckon it lies in yer boots ter make me say what I would want ter be doin', but ef it hurts yer ter know, I don't mind sayin', ef I thort thar wouldn't be too mighty much risk ov hevin' ter fight ther town, I'd go in an' camp thar fur awhile. It's a likely town fur a sport ter flourish, an' that's ther kind ov a town I'm lookin' fer jest now. A man can't dodge Dan Garland half a month without it's costin' suthin', an' I ain't John Jacob Gould nohow."

"And if you don't go in thar?"

"Take ther back-track, I should opine. That's bout all thar's left fur me."

"Reckon that won't do prezackly, either," said Woolly West, thoughtfully.

"Mebbee it don't strike yer thar yer knows rathyer more ov us, up hyer, than be accordin' ter ther law ov ther camp, an' you not one ov us. I don't say ez you would sell us out, but bein' ez you're hard up, an' sorter a desp'rit case, ett's runnin' a big reesk."

"What's bitin' yer now?" asked Rube, somewhat puzzled by what he could see was a sudden change in the tones of the man who had so far seemed rather a friend.

"Yer boss are sick, an' the hull gang are laid off frum work fur a while, so thar ain't no use ter strike fur a job with you galoots, an' I can't afford ter lazy 'round in ther mount'ins now that Dan Garland be out ov ther way. He had a monopoly on Red-Hot Rube, an' it'll be some time afore they find out what's happened, an' git another hound

on ther track. Now's ther time I orter be kiverin' my trail."

"Ett looks like a sure thing, but Double Cinch Dan are too mighty onsat in ter be dead sure ov ontill we see ther corpse. An' we hev your say so that it war him we war aifter. I'd a heap sight sooner hev seen ther body an' made sure. Ther boss are sick, but that's what's ther matter. Ontill he sez so we better not be takin' ary reesks, an' I guess you'll hev ter stay with us tell he sez you kin go."

"Well, I'll be dog-goned! Hevn't I bin in ther mix with yer ez deep ez you be in ther mire, fur ther last few days? Ain't I giv' proof ov what sort er a man I be? Didn't yer see me drap ther boss sleuthound, an' him take a snap shot et me? An' you want ter hint that I ain't a squar' man. Ef I thort you war meanin' it an' wanted ter play me foul, ez yer words'd sorter indecate, dog-gone me ef I wouldn't!"

"What?"

Woolly West spoke with a sneer, but his answer came like a flash of light.

"This!"

Both hands cf Rube shot up to a level, and a brace of muzzles frowned on the outlaws before they could anticipate the movement!

"Don't yer stir er I'll kill yer all! Lissen ter me warble an' then you kin hev yer ch'ice."

He had them all in front of him, and just so far bunched that he could cover every one of them with his eyes. After what they had seen of him there could be little doubt that he would shoot at the drop of the hat and not a man there was really ready for him.

Woolly West was known to have nerve enough in ordinary danger, and the men who trained behind him were of the same stripe, but none of them cared to court certain death, and would sooner take a good-sized bluff than go over the range. For the moment there was a deadlock, for Rube, so far, had only acted in his own defense.

The cheerful voice of Cherry Bite broke the temporary silence:

"Pard, you are a good one, and if I hadn't seen it I wouldn't have believed it. These kids are all too fresh, and it is just as good as a circus to see you call them down. Bless your soul! They don't mean you any harm, but they meant to put it straight whether you were going to stay with us or not, and they want you bad. How is it going to be? Peace, or war?"

"Fur a kid you hev a heap ov sense, an' I orter knowed; but I ain't used ter hevin' invertashuns throwed at me jest that way. I'm fur peace, ef I hev ter fight fur it, an' I ain't used ter bein' with a gang onless I hev somethin' ter say 'bout bossin' ther outfit, while I don't want ter take away ary man's job. Ef yer boss goes up ther flume you kin talk to me, but tell he does I'm free born an' white. I'm willin' ter look after things tell he comes 'round, ez I guess he will; but ez things stand I don't see you hev much ov a job ter give me, an' what's ther use ter dicker?"

He stood there, with a careless smile on his face, and his revolvers still pointing. What answer would have been given can only be guessed, but at that instant there was a far away crack, a rapid "thirr," and then, Red-Hot Rube fell senseless.

Some one from the other side of the river had taken a long-range shot, and had brought him to pot!

"It's that devil, Dan Garland!" exclaimed Cherry Bite, springing to the side of the senseless man.

"He has got away again. No lead can kill him! Quick! We must not leave Rube here. Lift him, three or four of you, and bear him off. He is as good as three dead men yet."

The men looked across the stream, but could see nothing to indicate where the shot came from, and they showed no desire to linger or explore. They caught up the relaxed body, and under the directions of Cherry Bite bore it away.

CHAPTER XIV.

BRIGHT JOHN GETS AN INTRODUCTION.

JACKSON SHAW was not drowned, nor had he met his death after any other fashion. He was not even hurt.

When he sprung from the tree into the river, he dove as deeply as the bottom would admit of, and then, turning, made his way back toward the bank.

When he reached it he came to the surface directly under the tree, and crawled up a shelving bank, into a small excavation among the roots. Before ensconcing himself in his hiding place, however, he launched adrift a sun-dried log which lay at the water's edge. It floated for a little close to the bank, and did not attract the attention of the watchers until it suddenly shot out into the rapid current of the stream.

Then, the view of it was uncertain and brief; but, if it had been found by the outlaws when searching below the falls, they would have discovered the marks of Red-Hot Rube's bullet, and have had some respect for his marksmanship, if not for his judgment.

The log, however, did not rise into sight. By some strange chance, it remained fixed where it fell after shooting the cataract, and so the outlaws were not assured of the facts in the case.

Shaw heard the call of Rube, and the rushing of feet, and after a moment's delay struck boldly out from his hiding place, directly across the river. He took large chances, but he won, and without being seen dragged himself up, and into the concealment of the brush and timber which lined the bluff.

Once secure in his covert, he looked anxiously across the water to see what would be the next movement of the outlaws.

He saw them come back from their fruitless search, and then halt for what appeared to be a conference.

When Rube whipped out his pistols and faced them all, the Stranger Sport smiled so heartily he came near to breaking out into a laugh.

"Great Scott!" he muttered.

"I could have done it that well myself; but, what is to come next? They can't have anything in for him; and he certainly don't want to exterminate them. How is the deadlock to be broken? I wish I was near enough to hear."

The deadlock came to an end sooner than he expected; and in an entirely different way; from behind him and above him there was the report of a revolver, and he heard a bullet whistle over his head. Then, Rube fell!

There was a momentary confusion among the outlaws, who gazed hurriedly around, unable to locate the spot from which the shot had come, and Shaw crouched there watching, and waiting to see what would be the result. When he saw the action of Cherry Bite, and understood from the gestures used what it was that was urged, he smiled and nodded in a satisfied manner.

"Good little cuss, that; and pluck enough for a dozen. They won't leave him there to die, even if they just have had a difference of opinion, and I guess his chances with them—even if he is hard hit, which I doubt—are better with them than if I should interfere. Now, let's see if I can find out who it was doing the shooting. Confound him, he's putting a finger into the pie, and if he don't keep it out I'll feel like giving him something to dream about."

Of one thing he was certain.

It was not likely he would have any more trouble with the bandits, and so far as they were concerned he was free to act about as he chose, so that he did not directly cross their path again.

He cast a glance across to where he had fastened his horse, and it was a temptation to look after the money invested there; but he thought better of it, and resolutely but silently climbed the bluff, taking care all the time to keep himself well under cover.

His presence was unsuspected by the man who was the object of his search, and for that reason, perhaps, he was able to make a complete surprise. The man was creeping softly down the bluff, tempering his haste with his caution, and the first intimation he had of the existence of Jackson Shaw was when the hand of the latter was laid heavily on his shoulder.

He turned swiftly around at that, and the pistol he was carrying in his hand turned with him; but, Shaw was the quicker, and by far the stronger.

His hand caught the wrist of the stranger in a grasp of iron, and held it immovable, while he stared his captive in the face with a smile.

"Steady, now!" enjoined Shaw, perfectly cool, not at all moved by the efforts of the other to throw off that grip.

"I just want to know who you are, and what you mean chipping into the game after this sort of a fashion."

The steady tones had something of an effect. The man ceased his struggles, and answered this stare with another of the same sort save that there was no smile about it.

Shaw was uncomfortably wet, and it was not hard to guess that he came from the other side of the river without stopping to find a bridge. At the same time he did not look like an outlaw, and there was a keenness in his questioning look which indicated he might speak by authority.

"Great snakes! Are you onto that game, too? Let up and we'll have an understanding in no time."

"That's good enough. All I want to be sure of is that you will talk first, and I don't think there is any danger of your shooting afterward. Who are you?"

"I am John Bright, of the Pinkertons. Sometimes called Bright John, and I am on the trail of the man who killed Colonel Kerry."

"Have you any papers to prove all that?"

Shaw asked the question absently. The announcement did not seem any great surprise to him, and he was really thinking more of what the presence of this man would amount to as a complication.

"Eh! What's that? Of course I can show that I belong to the force; and though I don't know you I have a sneaking idea you are in the same box. You have the look out of your eyes."

"Not far wrong in that; but I can't say that I approve of this promiscuous shooting, and if I had seen you trying to plant your lead I'm not sure but what I would have dropped you in your tracks. I fancy you haven't done as much damage as you might have done, and we'll let it go at that, but next time go a little slower. I may be in the bushes again."

"But you don't suppose I'm going to let a chance slip on account of that? Why, the reward is dead or alive—at least that part of it that the friends of the deceased are sticking up; and if I can draw in the ready cole on the reward I'll stand the chances of proving he was an outlaw."

"We won't quarrel about that, at present. The gentlemen were just trying to snatch me baldheaded, and if your diversion had come a little sooner it would have been a heap more welcome, but I'll swear I'd hate to work on your lines. What are you trying to do now?"

"I don't know that I am trying to do anything. I'm afraid you have shut me out with the distance flag. I did mean to see if I had salted him for good, and if so, where they buried him. It wouldn't have been hard to snatch the body before it went beyond identification, and that would have meant rocks."

"Don't alarm yourself about that. If the fellow you dropped had been cold meat they would never have taken the trouble to cart him off. He is very much alive, and the less you say about this little teaparty the better. The man who could drop Kerry would be very likely to come back on you."

"That's so. If you don't whimper I'll never tell. I'm going back to Red Bend now. They have got over their scare by this time, and will be too wide awake for me to follow. If I could have struck in at once I might have gone right along with them, while they were looking for me in the distance."

"You have nerve, anyhow. Run along, then. We can't pull together in this thing, for with me it's all or none, but I won't do anything to hinder."

"You wouldn't like to walk along in, and talk over the matter of the lay of the land? I might put you up to a wrinkle or two that you haven't thought of; and if you are the man some say you are—well, I'll own I could learn lots of wisdom."

Jackson Shaw shrugged his shoulders.

"Much obliged for the compliment, but it won't work. Besides, I have a horse over there which I must look after as soon as I think it is safe. I only hired him, and if I lose him I have to put up the whole value and not get a cent back."

"Then I'm off. It was just chance which brought me here, and when I saw my man I couldn't refuse the chance to drop him. Better luck next time. So long."

"Fare thee well," lightly answered Shaw, as he saw John Bright turn away, and apparently take the direction of Red Bend.

To himself he was thinking that the Pinkerton man had told less of truth than he might have done.

"If he didn't just follow me out here, and chip in only after he saw I was all out of danger, call me a double barreled booby from 'way back. He's John Bright, sure enough, but I'll stake chips on it that before he is done with this trail he'll have doubts whether John is so very bright. A man who murders for money deserves what he gets, and I wouldn't mind giving him a little something to think about myself."

It made very little difference whether John Bright went or not, as long as he did not get in the way. Shaw waited a little longer to make sure that he had not overlooked something in the first searching interview; then he took to the trail by which the outlaws had disappeared. He crossed the river, and made his way directly to the spot where Rube was standing when he dropped to the shot of John Bright.

It was not difficult to locate, and he examined the ground.

"Humph!" he muttered. "Johnny will have to do a little better shooting. Looks as though it all might have been a flamethough I never saw anything more real than the way he flopped over. There's no sign of blood here, and he could hardly have been badly hit without it."

He followed the track for some distance, and still there was no sign of crimson. By intuition he struck the true solution.

"It was a spent bullet, sure as you live, that struck him over the heart. If that article in his constitution is as strong as the rest of him, by this time he is alive and kicking. Guess I may as well go on to Billy Webb's, and see what intelligence is to be gleaned there. The job grows complicated. I wish, though, I knew what started the ruction going on when the Pinkerton chipped. It had its meaning, but blamed if I could see it."

CHAPTER XV.

THE STRANGER SPORT MAKES AN INVESTMENT.

BILLY WEBB received his visitor without any evidence of thankfulness for the visit. This was one of his off-days, anyhow, and he looked sourly at the horseman who drew up in front of his shanty, and whom he recognized as a party of whom he had a glance the previous evening.

"Billy Webb, I believe?" queried Jackson Shaw, with a raising of the eyebrows as he spoke.

"That's my name, according to the law of the camp; anything to say against it?"

"Not a thing. In fact, my friend, I am glad to hear it. You are supposed to own a half interest in the Diamond Drill Mine. If I am not mistaken, you nominally owned the whole of it at the time Judge Sanford came in."

"That's a true bill; but I say it because it's the truth, that every man in this camp knows. But, you are a stranger to me, and I don't know that I have any call to talk. Some men would have let you have it if you came asking about their private affairs."

"Glad to know you are not some men. Besides that, you probably suspect I have not come asking without an object."

"From your looks, I shouldn't suspect you were a blamed bigger fool than the law allows. There's a reason for it, like enough; but we may not hit it off quite so well when I know what it is."

"Don't mistake, Webb. I am not on board to give you any trouble; but I came out here to give you a chance for a square deal. What will you take for a clean title to your half-interest in the mine?"

Billy was suspicious by nature, and the

question was so unexpected he was hardly ready to return anything like an immediate answer.

"Come, now; if you really want to trade don't throw away a chance. I came out here so we could go over the matter together in a quiet way, and not be bothered by the curiosity or the suggestions of outsiders. I heard you were open to a deal, and from what they have told me of the Diamond Drill I decided it was the place for my money—of which I have not any too much. Do you want to sell?"

"I did," responded Billy, speaking cautiously.

"So I heard. Wanted Sanford to take the whole place off your hands, as you had a notion of jumping the camp."

"Yes, I would have sold out for a song, just then. But since that we found the big pocket, and I'm a few thousands to the good because I had to hold on against my will. What's to hinder my finding another pocket?"

"Nothing at all; and that's what I want to gamble on, provided you don't ask too much for the chances. Recollect, I have not seen the property—don't even know how the ore is running, or whether there is any ore at all. You must know that, sooner or later, provided it is worth the doing of it, Sanford will freeze you out. When one partner has money and the other hasn't, it always ends that way."

"That's right, stranger. I've known it to happen that way a dozen times, or more. But you're no fool, either. What's the matter with his doing the same thing by you?"

"Well, Billy, there's one thing. When I play cards I always win at least half of the time, and that's more than you can say. If your share of the nuggets hasn't found its way to Sanford over his table I'm a howling liar. You haven't got the luck to buck against his judgment; and I have."

"You're a man of luck, are you?"

"Largely, when it comes to handling cards or a mine. If I had stuck to those two I would have been a Croesus by this time. When I take a flyer in another direction I generally blow in my pile before I have the game fairly running. For that reason I am going to stick to the two, hereafter. And to test my luck I'm going into the Drill if you will sell at a reasonable figure. If not, I will look for some other investment."

"What do you call a reasonable figure?"

"You ought to suggest the answer to that question yourself. As near as I can make out, you couldn't make a cent on the ore in sight when Sanford came in, and you haven't struck anything richer yet, outside of that one pocket. A few dollars a day represents all the expenditure for labor which is being made; not counting the time you spend smoking around yourself. You don't want to throw away a single dollar more than you have to because you really have about as much idea of being struck by lightning as making another such a strike. How much?"

Webb was thoughtful, and evidently did not care to make an immediate answer.

"Stranger," he began.

"My name is Jackson Shaw, and I have been stopping at the Best Chance for a couple of days."

"All right. I'll remember it. First off, I am surprised, but I can't see how this can be anything but a square transaction if we once get down to business. I won't fix any price on the place, and I won't let you either, until you have gone over the ground."

"That's square enough."

"It ought to be. When you see just how big a hole we have there, and what it looks like, you can name your price and I'll mention mine. Then, if we're too far apart to 'split' on it we'll call it all off, and say no more about it. I'm willing to sell my half, and I don't know that I have to consult Sanford about the doing of it, either."

Webb had gotten over his sullenness, and if he did not anticipate a sale at least showed himself willing to dicker. He offered to lead the way to the mine with pleased readiness, and Jackson Shaw followed him without the least hesitation.

The journey to the shaft was not long, and they did not indulge in much conversation by the way.

They found things in a more progressive state than Shaw had expected. Four men were at work.

Billy seemed to be somewhat surprised himself, when he had made a little investigation. Two of these men he knew something about, but the other two were strangers.

"Sent hyer by ther jedge, ez they call him," answered one of the strangers, in response to a short question from Billy.

"Kicked fur a job, an' he jest give me a note to ther boss, an' sed he might ez well ez not put on a extra man er two, bein' ez thar war room fur 'em."

"Oh, go ahead! You can dig all you have a mind to, and I guess the judge is good for your wages if you can't trust me. I have nothing to say against it."

The men resumed their interrupted occupation, while Webb showed the intending customer about the mine.

When it came to looking over a mining property it turned out that Jackson Shaw was right at home. He knew what was to be looked for, and where it was to be found, and did not waste much time.

He looked at Webb keenly when the examination had been completed, and they had reached the open air again.

"It's the pocket which has been demoralizing you. There is no sign whatever that the thing will ever produce in paying quantities. I should judge that the ore never assayed more than three dollars to the ton."

"True bill, that; and yet, I'm 'way ahead on the game since I got into it."

"That's the time to stop. I'll give you five hundred dollars for the half share you hold, and promise that if ever we find a pocket you shall have one fourth of it. What more can any reasonable man ask, I should like to know?"

"Good enough, if you mean that last, and I'll take your word for it if you do. Whenever you post the wealth I'll put up the papers, and the deal will be all done. You'll have to explain things to the judge as best you can. There has been a little friction between us, on account of some differences of late, and I don't know that I will bother to say good-by."

"Nothing like swift trade when the profits are small. I'll give you the coin now; please give me a receipt. After that, I'll look it over and see if I have made any mistakes in what ought to be done."

The immediate production of the purchase money was more of a surprise than all that had gone before, and for the moment Billy Webb was staggered.

Jackson Shaw, however, gave him no time for consideration. He had a stylographic pen and a small tablet, so that it was the work of but a moment to have a receipt filled out, which he tendered to Billy with one hand, while in the other he held the money, all in crisp, one hundred dollar notes.

"You're crowding me pretty hard, but I guess it's all right," said Webb as he handed over the paper with his signature attached.

"Maybe you have bought into a row, and maybe you have bought into a lawsuit, but that's your lookout. Nobody ever questioned my claim, and Sanford is the only man to whom I ever passed an atom of it."

"I'll chance that. The whole fact is, I have come down here to stay. I wanted a place to begin at, and the Diamond Drill—or, the Big Pocket, as it is sometimes called, seems as good a place as any. If we are both satisfied with our bargain there ought to be no grumbling, and all I hope is that the judge won't get a chance at the boddle."

"I just reckon he won't," said Billy.

"Now, you come along back and I'll put you in possession. After that, you had better see Sanford before you do much monkeying. He's a peculiar sort of a man, and would as soon stoot his partner as any other man if he thought he wasn't doing the square thing."

Accordingly, the two went back into the mine, where Shaw was introduced as the future owner of Billy's late share, and save for the writing out of the formal bill of sale, the transaction was complete.

"Guess if you can get along with Sanford

you will have no trouble with me,' was the cheerful salutatory of the new owner.

"I'll talk the matter over with him, and if he's agreed we'll begin work at the other end. I have an idea you have been working in the wrong direction. I'll take a little look around in the neighborhood before I go back to town. I want to see how the land lays."

Billy Webb did not wait for him, and leaving his horse he went out to explore on foot. He did look over the neighboring ground somewhat, but the examination was cursory, and he made no acquaintances. Before long he had slipped out of sight, and was making his way up the mountain.

CHAPTER XVI.

RED-HOT RUBE MAKES A BARGAIN.

WHEN Jackson Shaw reasoned out a theory in regard to the fall of Rube the rustler he hit the truth as well as though he had been informed of the facts.

Had John Bright taken his shot from a point even a dozen yards nearer it is probable the result would have been fatal. As it was, there was not even a slight wound.

In all likelihood, the bullet came tumbling along, heels over head, and struck sharply with its side on a rib directly over the heart. The shock was great, but not fatal, and before Rube had been carried a hundred yards he began to come to himself again.

"Set me down thar, er minnit. I'm all right."

He spoke with a mumble, but with gathering strength, and his request was gladly obeyed.

"Thar's a flask in my hip pocket; gimme a drink."

His second request was also obeyed, and while he was slowly tasting the fiery fluid, Woolly West turned to the man:

"Reckon we kin manage ther case now, an' you better run erlong. Ef he's wu't bringin' we'll bring him; an' ef he ain't, Cherry an' me kin dig all ther grave ez will be needed."

The result was, Woolly West and the boy were left alone with the rustler.

Although it was only a question of a few minutes when Rube would be restored to almost his usual strength, the two paid no attention to the fact that just before the shot there had been a difference of opinion which was beginning to assume a very ugly phase. Cherry Bite had picked up, and still held, the pistols which had dropped from Rube's relaxing hands, but there had been no further search for weapons, and there was no movement to hold him under a drop.

"Ye'r a good man, an' hard ter kill," said Woolly, meeting the inquiring gaze of the revived man.

"Ef yer hedn't bin quite sich a fool you wouldn't hed sich a narrer 'scape. We didn't want ter let yer go 'cause we hed use fur ye; an' ef yer ain't too bad crippled up we got use fur ye yit."

"Crippled, thunder! I'm jest ez good a man ez I ever war. Nothin' but a spent ball ag'in' me ribs, an' ther skin ain't broke. By this time yer orter know I'm ez reasonable ez a lamb in June ef yer treats me white; but all-fired hard ter drive when you begins ter crack yer whip."

"Thar's no question 'bout drivin' yer, are ther', Cherry Bite?"

"Nary drive, old man; but if he's not too all-fired fresh we'd like to lead him along a bit in mighty good company. Till we heard you were shoal on the bar we didn't care about making an offer, but if you are open to a bargain we can give you a good one. How does that strike you, Reuben?"

"All ov a heap, pervidin' I don't hev ter go back on a pard that are trustin' me, er give away ther boys ez are just beginnin' ter think I'm solid rocks ter tie to."

"It's nothing of that kind, I can assure you. When Woolly West spreads a lay-out you can be sure it's not to play the men he calls friends for his suckers."

"An' I ain't ter do ary shootin' frum behind er bush. When I down a man it won't be in ther back onless I give him ther chance an' he won't turn. I jest want ter live erlong feelin' half ways white, anyhow."

"Oh, you are white as the driven snow, after our ways of thinking; and you can count on keeping so if you travel with us. If that satisfies you we'll shake hands on a trade, and then tell you what it is. If it don't suit you there's no harm done; and if it does there is an opening for big money."

"And no going back on the boss in it, eh?"

"I am afraid the boss is past going back on in this life," said Cherry Bite, with a perceptibly saddened tone.

"If he was able to talk for himself, though, he would say it was all right, and that you should fire ahead. Perhaps you would like to ask him anyhow?"

"Oh, thunder, no! I'll take that part of it on trust. Now, drive on with yer meat wagon. Here's my hand on it fur a square deal, without ary limit."

He extended his hand gravely, and when each in turn clasped it, he lounged back and announced he was ready for business.

The two looked at each other, and at a motion from Woolly, the other spoke.

"Pard, there's big money in this for us, if we make the rifle; and that being so, if we want to be sure of Red-Hot Rube, he must be sure there is big money in it for him. We don't count exactly on putting you in on the ground floor, because we can get the work done cheaper than that; and it's not altogether sure we haven't got the best part of the job over as it is. What we want to know is, what are your figures."

"What ther traffic'll bear," was the ready answer.

"That don't give us much to go on, because we don't know what it is all going to amount to. We want you to understand the boys have been paid special for whatever they have done in the matter, and are out of it when the divvy comes. Name your figures right off the handle? How much will buy you, soul and body, under the limitations you have already made?"

"That sounds ez though you war goin' ter talk large, ef I understand yer, though I ain't a walkin' dickshunary. How does ten thousand strike yer?"

"You do talk loud, but I think we can meet you, if we succeed. If we don't, and you think the work is worth it, draw on us for half the money and it will come."

"No monkey work about it, sure?"

"Are you the kind of a looking man we would be likely to monkey with?"

"Suthin' in that; barg'in's done. Now, what's ther lay-out, an' how soon does ther work begin?"

"The work has begun already; and will be kept up till it's a success, or both of us go under the sod. We woke Red Bend up last night trying to get in some of it; and they will be apt to hear from us again before long?"

"How did yer come out?"

"Better than we expected, and not as well as we ought to have done. We had probably the key to the situation in our hands, and lost it."

"The which? Don't talk Greek ter me. What's up?"

It had to be done sooner or later, and so, Cherry Bite went on and gave a brief outline of what had happened at Sanford's the previous night, winding up by telling that though they had captured the very thing they most wanted, yet in some way they had lost it again; and that the man who had lately escaped from them had appeared on the carpet, and shut off further progress.

As the reader knows, there was quite a story to tell, and Rube listened to it without interruption, and with every symptom of lively interest. When Cherry Bite was done, he was thoughtful for a minute or two before speaking.

"Pards," he said at length, "you ain't runnin' this thing; not on yer own hook, anyhow. Whar's ther head center? I kin dicker with him a heap sight better than I kin with you. An' I'll give yer my word ov honor that I won't take no short cuts on you."

Cherry Bite laughed merrily.

"Might have known you would have seen that far into the millstone. You are right enough. There's a boss you haven't seen yet, and Woolly and I are his men, and only here for running this little affair. When it's done we calculate to skip out, and the boys

understand all that. If we could take you to the head center we would do it all tight enough, but as we can't till he shows up again, you have got to bargain with us or not at all. How is it going to be?"

"He'll be hyer some time, I reckon," queried Rube, cautiously.

"Of course he will. If he don't hear from us before long, like enough he will turn up to see what we have been doing; and when he gets word we have taken the trick, he will be on the carpet only too quick."

"That's good ernough, but how am I ter know what he'll be willin' ter pay fur my work? I'll chip right inter most anything fur pure fun; but when it's work, I'm that perci'kler I can't rest. Ett's great big dollars I'm wantin' then, an' ef I don't git 'em sometimes s'uthin' happens."

"Great big dollars you will get," responded Cherry, who did not seem altogether pleased with this unexpected hesitancy. We'll have the party where he will have to pay, and we can put on the pressure about as hard as we want to. And you will be getting your good out of it right along, because, if Dan Garland started on your trail he meant to keep it right till he got to the end. You have had a couple shies at him, and you haven't thrown him off very badly yet. If you don't have just such backing as we can give you it's my opinion he will down you yet."

"Now you are talkin' sense, Cherry, an' I'll make ther offer ez ther best I kin do. Ef Dan ain't dead, an' still able fur ter go on my trail, ef you help me I'll help you, an' I'll trust ter ther honor among thieves ter yer givin' me a squar' show fur all ther coin ther ought ter be in it fur me. Ef that don't suit yer, let ther thing flicker, thar's no more ter be did with me."

"That's just what we wanted to hear you say. Pards we are, and Woolly and I will look after your interests as well as we would look after our own."

"Shake."

Rube extended his hand toward the speaker, and was met with as cordial a motion. The three sealed the compact, and then were ready for business.

"An' what's ther fu'st deal ye'r goin' ter make now that I'm in ther game?"

Rube spoke airily; but it was plain he was no longer devoid of interest. From the glitter in his eyes it was plain he was almost feverishly anxious to get to work.

"Only one thing ter do; an' 'bout ther only thing we bin thinkin' ov doin'. Ter git hold ov ther woman in ther case. An' we got ter do it quick. You think Dan Garland are hyer ter git onto you, but we know he are ez much interested lookin' out fur ther woman. That's why we an' you ought ter be pards."

The rustler uttered an exclamation of surprise, but it was not at the words of Woolly, though they came like a revelation.

From behind a huge boulder not far away there came the sound of a sharp spat, and a man came staggering out, with a pistol clinched in his hand. He reeled, stumbled and finally fell headlong, and as he measured his length on the ground they heard a harsh laugh, and then rapidly retreating footsteps.

CHAPTER XVII.

JOHN BRIGHT GETS A WAKING UP.

THE intrusion was a surprise, but it did not take the trio off their guard.

Before the man on the ground had time to turn and point his weapon Rube was on him, and he came with no light force, either.

With an ease and celerity which was surprising he caught the two wrists of the man and forced them back, the revolver in his hand being wrenched loose in the proceeding.

Then, despite the struggles of the fellow, the rustler raised him from the ground as though he was a child, and stared into his face.

It was rough handling, but perhaps it was the means of his salvation. Woolly West, and his young pard, were almost as quick, though for the instant they never stirred out of their tracks. Woolly snatched out a knife, which he balanced for a throw, while Cherry Bite dropped the muzzle of a shoot-

ing iron straight at the man on the ground, and came very near to pulling the trigger. Had not Rube been in the line of fire the bullet would have sped on its way with unerring certainty.

The little hesitancy caused by all three turning at the outset toward the man who was near, saved the man in the distance. He had the boulder between him and the outlaws, and lost no time in making his retreat.

When Cherry rushed around the rock, and caught a glimpse of the fleeting figure, he was too far off to risk a shot at him, and it was not even certain what he looked like. West passed, and might have wasted time in pursuit but for some words of caution.

"Hold hard, Woolly. With legs like those he's not going to let you catch up this morning. You will have to wait for some other morning. Let's have a look at the fish we got in the net. There something odd about the little racket, anyhow, and it looks as though the man on the run might be more our friend than we know of."

"That's so. Er leastwise, it's cl'ar ther two couldn't pull well together. But which ov 'em war pullin' fur us, an' which ag'in' us, mayn't be jest so easy ter make out. Let's see what Rube hez got ter say about it."

Rube was not saying much of anything, just then.

He had his captive's hands tied, and was studying his face with a savage scowl, having jowled him down upon the ground again, and covered him with the very weapon he had dropped in the struggle.

Cherry came forward, looked into the face of the intruder, and laughed.

It would have been hard to help doing that.

The intruder was none other than John Bright, though he had no intention of announcing his name in a select party like this. As he gazed up at the threatening tube there was a ghastly look of horror on his face, which for the moment had a chalky appearance, as though every drop of blood had been driven away from the surface by the prospect of what seemed certain death.

"Blame yer," Rube finally snarled; "I du'nno yer, but I orter know yer; an' ef I war only right down sure, I wouldn't wait a weenty second. I'd let them brains all out afore you could wink twiste. What in high hades was ye doin', spookin' 'roun' hyer?"

"Go slow, please, just a leetle slow," pled the man.

"I don't want to have to tell my yarn all over again, and your pards are coming now. I'm all right; I'll swear I'm all right; and I was looking for you to do you good."

"That's ther reg'lar story," sneered Rube.

"An' you with that shootin'-iron in yer fist, jest too ready ter take a snap-shot at yourn truly."

"Hope I may die if you aren't all off the track. I came out here to look for you—that's all right, fast enough. But I didn't want to do you any harm. I only wanted to join."

"Join what?"

Rube slung the question at him savagely. It was short, but the way he put it had a great deal of meaning.

Bright hesitated a trifle with his answer, and looked from one to the other, of the three. He was not so sure the line he was taking was a safe one. The announcement had not caused any one to look at him a bit more kindly.

Still, it was now too late to alter his programme, and he went desperately ahead.

"I wanted to join the gang, of course. It's about my only chance to get away from the hounds, for they have been running me close. I had to skip out from Walnut Bar, and the same infernal hound dogged me over to Red Bend. I looked for you along the road, and this morning I came out to find you. I can be as good a man as your best, according to my size, and I tell you, if I hadn't been spying around, that fellow would have had a cinch on you."

"What about that fellow?" sharply asked Cherry Bite, stepping forward.

"Who was he, and was he after you or us?"

The question disconcerted Bright. He had not before seen that the separate sections of his story, as he had intended to

tell them, would not exactly agree, and hesitated to answer.

"Out with it if you know. And if you don't maybe we can make a better guess at things than if you told us your version."

"Maybe I'm wrong; but if the fellow that tipped me that tip wasn't Dan Garland, the double cinch detective, I'm away off."

"And do you mean to say that you led him out here where he could get a glimpse of us, and hear what we were talking over? Maybe it was a mistake done on purpose. If it was, I tell you there is a heap of trouble hanging over your head."

"Perhaps he was following me, and that's a fact. I thought so, anyhow, when I had a glimpse of him as he was coming at me. But I may have been mistaken. He may have been after you from the start. If that's so I have put you on your guard if I have done nothing else. That ought to show my good faith."

"Put us on our guard! You have the cheek of a cast iron dog. Do you suppose we didn't know that Dan Garland was in the neighborhood? No, Mister Man, what's working through my mind is whether you're not a side pard of his, and working up one of the games Dan loves to lay out. What is your name?"

The abrupt question did not take the man of his guard, and his answer came so promptly that even the keen eyes of Cherry Bite could see no hesitation or delay.

"Rob Riley. Sometimes called, Riley the Kid."

"Don't know him—do you, pard?"

Cherry Bite turned to Rube, with a quick, interrogative glance.

The rustler was studying the prisoner with a savage stare.

"D'unno him meself, but I've heard ov sich a man, an' this gerloot would jest about fill ther bill."

"Know any good of him?"

"Not a blame thing, after my way ov thinkin'. Riley, ther Kid are a cold-blooded coward, clean through. Jest 'bout this size, an' same kind ov hair an' eyes, ez I've heard. When he gets in a corner he's ez skeered ez this chap peared ter be; an' when he gits ther other feller in a corner he jest shoots regardless."

The prisoner listened with some show of anger, and did not allow Rube to finish his remarks.

"That may be the way you look at it, but there's a heap of men who see it in a different light. Rob Riley never made a pard he didn't stay with till the last horn blew, and there never was a day he wasn't ready to take the chances of being quicker on the draw than the other fellow. So far he's always played the limit and hit the turn. Give me any show for my white alley and I'll prove it after any fashion you choose."

"Mebbe you know me, then?"

"I should smile. If you ain't Red-Hot Rube you're his ghost. I never saw you before that I remember, but after all I've heard of you I can't go far wrong."

"Perhaps you've heard ov a man they called Fairhead Frank?"

The question was another blow, and once more John Bright—or, Rob Riley, as he now chose to call himself—shriveled up. He answered nothing.

"Puts you in a bad kinder a box, don't it? Fairhair was a pard ov mine, ez war playin' a frien'ly game ov draw, never thinkin' ov danger, an' a slinkin' kiote they called Rob Riley crep' up an' plastered him frum behind. I bin a-huntin' him frum that day ter this, an' now I got him, what yer think I'm goin' ter do with him?"

"You heard a blamed lie," finally answered the prisoner, bristling up like a caged wolf.

"We both shot at the drop of the hat, and Frank tumbled. That's all there was of it. I got his lead through my hat, and mine went through his liver."

"You say. But ther boyees ez saw ther game sez that Frank flopped over on ther floor, and jest natur'ly pulled trigger after he war dead. This ain't my circus fur ther present, an' I'm turnin' yer over ter ther tender mercies ov them ez hez ther say-so; but when they git rid ov you, ef that's ary thing left, I'll have a word er two ter say, meself."

"That's all right. If I had known you

were here, I'll own I would have steered clear of the camp; but now that I am here the best thing I can do is to wagon on, right straight ahead. I reckon Captain Hardhand is the boss of this outfit, and I'm willing to let it go at what he says. Bring me before him, and I'll agree to nod just as he winks."

"Afore him you shall go," said Woolly, suddenly taking a hand in.

"But you don't want to forget it that if we find ary snide game behind all this, you'll go a leetle furder, an' it'll be at ther end ov a rope. Kim along. Biz hyer are over fur ter day."

Bright showed no hesitancy about obeying the order.

He rose with alacrity, and stepped off between Rube and Woolly West. He knew well enough the risks he was running, but they were all in the day's work. The recognition of Rube ought to set him solid with the gang; and as for Rube himself, he was the man he was after.

And in spite of the fact that he and Dan Garland did not take the same views of the true methods of work, he had an abiding hope that the famous detective would come to his aid if nothing else would save him.

"If I get ahead of him well and good. If I don't, he will be along shortly and get me out of what may be an infernally unpleasant predicament. At all events, ten thousand is a big sum; and Bright John is the man who is going to make it, even if Garland does want a divvy."

Woolly West dropped back to speak to Cherry Bite, and a whisper from Rube broke in on the current of his thoughts.

"Look a leetle out. Ett don't suit me ter show up yer hand jest yet, but ef you ain't John Bright, detectiv', I'm a howlin' liar frum 'way back."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MARSHAL FROM WALNUT BAR.

THINGS were going along about as usual at the Big Pocket Saloon.

So far as the judge could see, there was nothing different in the atmosphere at home, and he had left Stella there, reading a book.

To tell the truth, he was somewhat afraid of his sister.

He had been so looking up to her, in his thoughts, for so many years, believing that, in contrast with his own, her life was a wonderful success, that even her sudden appearance, in semi-disguise, and something like a fugitive from justice, had not broken the spell.

He had troubled himself about her for a few days, and had a keen eye for all new-comers who might seem suspicious, but he soon got over that.

At the Big Pocket a certain percentage of new-comers was the rule, rather than the exception, and before long he ceased to worry about what might be in store for Stella. She had money, and she did not seem entirely overwhelmed by her misfortunes. He allowed her to take care of herself while he went on with his own affairs.

Nevertheless, the raid on the house opened his eyes to the fact that there was something to be apprehended beyond the visitations of the minions of the law. The attack on the safe was the smallest part, and the least important, of the affair; and as the villains went away empty-handed, he shrewdly suspected they might return again.

Of course, Red Bend had some sort of legal machinery which might be put to work for the protection of himself and sister, but Sanford never thought of it. In all such matters he, as well as the majority of the inhabitants, preferred to look after their own safety when there was danger in the air; and the marshal seldom came to the front till it was time to draw a coroner's jury.

There was a rough and ready element lying around, which was nevertheless reasonably reliable; and from his position as both saloon-keeper and mine-owner, Judge Sanford knew all about it.

He had not been seen speaking to any one in confidence, nor did he confide his intentions to Stella; but the day following the attack he quietly arranged for a little surveillance of the place, and believed he alone knew that three men, very good with the pistol, were keeping a sharp look-out, either

in turn or all together, over his property, and his handsome relation.

Then he felt reasonably easy; and when the crowd was swinging into the saloon, so far as his face showed, he had not a care in the world.

He had heard nothing during the day in regard to the guest at the Best Chance, who had registered under the name of Jackson Shaw, except those floating remarks which amount to nothing; and he did not even know that the greater part of the time he had been without the limits of the town.

It was more than a surprise when Billy Webb came rolling along, with glory in his eyes, and a great wad of wealth in his pockets.

"Set them up, Johnny," was his salutation to the bartender, and he waved his hand to his friends near the bar.

"I've made my strike, and unless things turn around endways, and the deuce breaks loose I'm going on my travels. I say, judge, I wish you joy of your new pardner. He's a daisy, and knows a good thing when he sees it. You've been putting up the scads to work your half of the mine, but you can take a lay-off. If I'm not wide away from his line he'll want to run the whole thing for all it's worth."

"What you talking about, Billy? Are you drunk again, or is this the same old case?"

"Nary drunk, my noble lord. I always told you I'd sell out the first chance I got; and now I've went and gone and done it. That's all there is to it."

"The thunder you say! And who is the lucky man?"

The judge did not know whether to be surprised, or to believe the whole story a fabrication.

"Don't know much about him, except the letters of his name, and they spell Jackson Shaw, large as life. He said he was coming around to see you soon as he got into town; and I thought he would have been here by this time."

"What in blazes did he want with a share in the Diamond Drill? If there was anything in sight you would be sharp enough to hold on to it; and if there wasn't, he don't look just green enough to buy."

"Didn't ask him. Reckon he thinks if Judge Sanford holds on to a half interest he won't be such a blamed idiot if he takes the other half, low for cash."

Sanford rubbed his nose thoughtfully. The new man had done him a good turn, and it was hardly the fair thing to make a kick, though he would sooner have kept Billy Webb in with him. He knew all about Billy, and how to manage him in case the mine ever amounted to anything, and about this individual who was now his partner he could only say that he had some nerve and was considerable of a mystery.

He showed no sign of anger, or even dissatisfaction, however.

"All right, Billy; if you call that going let her flicker. I won't say I wouldn't sooner have had you in with me when the final clean-up come around, and have had a little inkling of what was going on before I lost my chance to scoop the whole thing; but if he turns out a square man I won't grumble, and perhaps there will be something in the old thing yet."

"Square or not, I've got his coin, and as man nor angels can get me into a game again while I stay in the limits of Red Bend, I can't see I can help but be ahead on the deal. Going to go back East this time, sure."

Billy had made the threat often enough before, but no one took it seriously. He had been a fixture in Red Bend so long it hardly seemed possible he would ever get away. There was some little chaffing, which might have gone much further had there not been an interruption. The gentleman who had bought the half interest in the mine made his appearance.

Shaw came in no great haste, but he wasted no time in going up to Sanford.

"Billy has been telling you the news, if I'm not wide off; and if you know a good thing when you see it, as I think you do, I don't believe you are going to kick on it."

"Not a bit of it," interrupted the judge, holding out his hand after a hearty fashion.

"The fact of it is, I wouldn't wonder if you were just the man I was looking for. I know you are if you have the funds to stand a plunge. Billy was a good man to have around, in his way; but he didn't carry the capital; and blamed if I was going to sink a fortune on the off chance; and make him everlasting rich if we happened to make a strike."

"Don't know whether I will hit your idea of a pard or not, for I don't count on doing that kind of thing either. I'm willing to put up a fair amount; but if I have any say so I'll have the men working at the other end."

The men had drawn aside a little from the rest, so they were out of earshot.

Sanford gave a start, slight but perceptible to the keen eyes of his newly-made partner.

"See here, honor bright, do you know anything more about the Diamond Drill than the rest of us? It looks as though there might be something of the kind."

"Nary thing, my jovial friend. At least, I never was in the mine till to-day; and never knew there was such a place as the Diamond Drill until I struck Red Bend."

"All right. As long as you treat me square I can't see it would make much difference if you had. Just a little curious about my pard, don't you know. You don't count on swinging a pick out there, yourself, I reckon; and you don't precisely expect to be getting a living out of it as you are waiting around for the great strike. Billy, there, has been expecting ever since we hit that pocket?"

"Well, no. If you don't object I may drop out there occasionally, and show them how to put their shoulders to the wheel, but I'm no great hand to do more hard work of that kind than the law requires. Something else will turn up, no doubt; and meantime, I'm mighty handy with a deck of cards."

Jackson Shaw spoke laughingly, but there was a challenge in his tones which at another time, or in another man, would have doubtless provoked a sharp answer.

Sanford only smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Glad to hear it, but after the favor you have done me, and what I might call mine, I guess I won't test your knowledge. I never go for a man unless I intend to skin him; and I don't want to do that to you."

"It is to be peace, then. Good for that. I'll manage to wagon along some way, and if I don't come out jay-bird it will be a wonder."

"Steady!" said the judge in a low tone, and making an almost imperceptible motion, which directed the attention of Shaw toward the door.

"I'll talk it over with you by and by. Just now I'm running the saloon. Meantime you can carry on things as you choose, so you treat me square. Who in wrath have we here?"

The five men who stepped into the room came in a body, and it was not hard to see they belonged to one band.

They looked around them as though they were at home in such places, and advanced to the bar without the least hesitation. At the same time, those who looked at them saw that the leader wore on his breast a silver star, and the men with him had a resolute look as though they were not there for fun at all.

Jackson Shaw glanced carelessly at the men, without a thought that he had any interest in them; but half suspecting that his newly made partner might.

Shaw was standing at one end of the bar, his back to the corner of the room. There was no chance to get behind him, but the position left him without any road for retreat if the time came when it would be an item to have one.

The new-comers kept in a solid bunch until they were almost at the bar. Then, they suddenly deployed, each man showing a pistol, and their leader a brace, which he leveled at the head of Jackson Shaw, at the same time exclaiming:

"I'm George Brown, a marshal from Walnut Bar, and I want you, Captain Hardhand! Hold up your paws, and raise them empty, for if we see a sign of steel when they come up we'll blow you cold."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WAY THE RACKET ENDED.

THIS time the Stranger Sport was taken off his guard, and the drop was on him without remedy.

Indeed, had it not been for the significance of the leveled weapons, he might not have understood the call at all.

He look inquiringly at the man who called himself a marshal, but said nothing, and his arms remained resting quietly as they had been.

"You hear me, say?"

Brown's question was harshly spoken, and his fingers seemed to be trembling on the triggers. He talked as though he meant shoot, and the only wonder was he had not shot already.

"I hear you," retorted Shaw, coolly.

"If there is any person here who don't he must be deaf. But who the thunder are you talking to?"

"To you, Captain Hardhand. We have you down fine at last, and I reckon there will be about five thousand dollars for us who are assisting in the operation. If there's any man here who is not for law and order I warn him to stand back or he will get his last sickness. For the last time, you. Up with your hands or we'll take you a corpse."

He spoke firmly, and the men behind him looked as though they would stay with him to the last, though the weapons they were handling never raised to a level. And meantime, the rest of the men in the room looked curiously toward the stranger.

Of them all, Judge Sanford was perhaps the only one there who believed from anything like evidence that the charge could not possibly be true. With the rest of them it seemed more likely there was something in it; and a good many were willing to hail the announcement with a cheer.

"You are talking through your hat, or something worse," was the cool answer.

"I know, and so does everybody else know, who I am, or who I am not; but who knows anything about you? To one thing I will swear. You're not George Brown, of Walnut Bar; and I don't believe you are a marshal at all."

There was a peculiar twinkle in his eyes as he spoke which might have warned the spokesman of the other side that something was coming, and perhaps have precipitated a catastrophe if the so-called marshal had not been too intently studying his features in search of something else.

Jackson Shaw, with his hands empty, and two revolvers ready to drop him the moment they made a motion to fill, did not seem very dangerous, either to his would-be captors, or to outsiders. The men of Red Bend crowded up in their interest, and all eyes were directed to the front.

They turned quickly at the sudden sound of a blow, and only in time to see one of the men who claimed to be from Walnut Bar plunging forward under the impetus of a stroke which had almost lifted him from his feet.

Right against his leader this man careered, turning him half-way around, and leaving Jackson Shaw for the instant uncovered.

At that chance the Stranger Sport did not hesitate a second, but sprung fiercely forward, striking as he came.

Left and right his fists shot out, the one catching Brown on the jaw, and the other landing well up on the face of the man who had collided with him.

No one really noticed who struck that first blow, or was able to tell afterward, and the people of the Bend did not see much of the circus which immediately followed. They were too busy getting out of the way. It was not their affair, and until they knew more of the rights of things they did not intend to make it theirs. When they had opened a little circle in which the combatants might have fair play the frolic was nearly over.

Shaw had not drawn a weapon, but had been engaged in hitting vigorously from the shoulder. He actually had the five men down in a heap, and Vince Doyle, who had happened to be conveniently near, was on top of them.

Vince had edged in with the crowd of supposed marshals, and had stayed with them

when the rest of the town drew back. Two or three shots had been fired during the *melee*, but not one of them had done any more damage than to mark the wall at Jackson Shaw's back.

With the last stroke, Shaw sprung back and whipped out his own revolver, which he dropped to an aim on the squirming mass on the floor.

"Steady, you, yourselves!" he shouted.

"I don't know who you are, but you aren't the men you pretend to be, and if I took you all in out of the wet I reckon you would all be paid for. You may have papers all right for Captain Hardhand, and I have no objection to your having him if you can find him; but you can't have me—not if this court knows herself. And the man who backs you, till I lay down the law and the prophets, dies."

With the revolver in one hand, he made a sweeping gesture; and to the bystanders it seemed that his eyes followed the barrel, and yet lingered on everyone there. The people of Red Bend were not anxious to chip, anyhow; but if they had been, they would have thought twice before they would have taken a step. This man seemed to cover them all with eyes and muzzles.

And then, with a sudden turn of that barrel, he took a snap shot at a man who was just throwing up a pistol.

The man was Vance Doyle, and at the report he staggered back, shaking the hand from which the revolver he lately held had been shot away. Jackson Shaw's bullet had struck square on the end of the cylinder, forcing the muzzle of the weapon downward just as it was discharged, so that his bullet tore harmlessly into the floor just as his relaxing fingers unclosed from the butt of the weapon he was holding.

It would have been better for Nippers if he had remained with the heap on the floor until orders had been received; and the swiftness with which he had darted up and back had only brought him punishment.

"Easy there, Nippers," laughed the Sport.

"I don't want to hurt you, but you mustn't bottom-deal for the other side. Next time I'll lay it on the bridge of the nose, and it'll stay there."

His battered bullet had dropped at Doyle's feet, though, perhaps, the spy of the outlaws had not noticed the fact. At any rate, he recognized the threat.

"I didn't mean—" he began confusedly. If, as he suspected, this was Dan Garland, the threat was no empty boast. So long as the double cinch detective had the opportunity he could put his lead just about where he wanted it.

"Dry up on what you meant. I want hands free to deal with George Brown and his friends. They have more sense than you, for they know I have them covered, and they've never made a whimper."

To read this one would think that it was all said calmly and quietly, and that there was no excitement in the Big Pocket Saloon—but in such an idea he would have been all wrong.

But the men of the Bar kept on the outside, and were just watching the circus, without trying to make themselves part of it, while Shaw had got in his work so well that one half of those who were in the show were near the state of unconsciousness and the rest were all abroad. If the five men could have sprung to their feet together, and scattered out, running some little risk to be sure, they might, among them, have succeeded in getting the drop on the one man in the corner. He could not, until their pretensions had received some sort of investigation, have coolly dropped them, one at a time, before they could rally for a defense. Even Red Bend would not have stood that.

If these men had been average men, and men of the law, they would have been apt to either adopt some such course, or to shoot regardless, the moment they were able to recover or raise their revolvers.

That they did not, made a sudden revulsion of feeling in the mind of every man there. They were not ready to take the side of the one against the five; but they suspected the charge against him was not a true bill, and when his muzzle turned from Vince Doyle, that worthy found himself under the attention of the men who knew him.

"Let up, Vince. Ye'r well out ov it, an' yer better stay out tell we hear what's comin'. That's a mighty good man what's shoutin' an' don't yer furgit it."

That was what the nearest man to Doyle had to say, and at the same time he laid a warning hand on the shoulder of the half-dazed man.

"Thet's so, Vince. It ain't likely ef that's anything in what that geroot sez, ez claims ter be frum Walnut Bar, thet you er I kin git a smell ov ther five thousand; an' I've jinn'rally 'bserved that ett's ther fresh out-siders ez ketches ther cold lead."

That was what another judicious friend added; and all Red Bend, so far as it was there assembled, stood, pistol in hand, waiting to see and hear what was to come next.

Shaw was a picture, fresh, smiling and full of nerve.

"No you don't, Mr. Brown!" he exclaimed, as the leader of the five staggered to his feet, feeling for his weapons, and only half conscious that his revolver had been flung from his hand in the brief *melee*.

"When I cut loose you ought to know I'm a holy hurricane on wheels; and I've almost got it in for you now. But I'm a good, square, honest man, without anything to fear from the law."

"Prove it then!" gritted the leader, gathering himself together for what might be a spring.

"That's what I'm ready to do; only, I'm not so sure you are the law, or that I have nothing to fear from you."

"If you're an honest man why didn't you throw your hands up when the law told you to?"

Brown was talking for time and chances, and the Stranger Sport at last was certain of it, though he did not let that fact hurry him in the least.

"They are always up for the law as I recognize it; but I don't recognize you. I'm willing to let five men of Red Bend cover me while we hunt the matter up; but I want five of them to cover you. Let them shoot the first who moves till we know which is which, and when the court gives judgment, your gang or I will go into the pen. You are not Captain Hardhand; but I have about concluded you belong to his lot, and if I were hunting road-agents I'd take you in."

The charge created a sensation, and there is no telling what would have followed had it not been for a sudden interruption, as startling as it was unexpected.

No one in the room had ears for anything without, but a man suddenly burst in through the door, panting, breathless and bleeding.

"Git 'round to yer house, jedge!" he shouted. "They've kim back. They plugged me, and I reckon ther gal are gone!"

CHAPTER XX.

TRAPPED AT LAST.

THE proprietor of the Big Pocket Saloon had remained very much at his ease while the affair was progressing between his newly made partner and the five men who had announced themselves through their leader as officers of the law.

It was true that for a time there was a desperate struggle, and that most men would have thought it would end by the wrecking of his house. There were five men to one, and the five looked rough and ready, and competent against any kind of wild work.

Against the five there was only one man, with, at the start, the advantage against him.

But the breakage of a few windows was nothing much to Judge Sanford, and as to taking sides in the fray—he was very much like the rest of Red Bend. They, and he, had not much respect for the law when it interfered with their own affairs, but a great deal when it was dealing with some one else.

Jackson Shaw had just become his partner, it was true; but as he had not been consulted in the matter it constituted no particular claim on him; and the fact was, he had hastily run over in his mind the advantage it might be if the stranger should be taken away.

Only, there was one thing pretty certain. Whoever George Brown might turn out to

be, Jackson Shaw was not Captain Hardhand.

With all this in his mind he simply stood back, watching his own interests as far as he could, after having locked the money drawer, and let things take their course.

He did not appeal to the citizens to take one side or the other, or even to deal gently with his furniture.

But when the messenger from his own home came bursting in, and after shouting his intelligence, in a voice which finally rose into a husky scream, dropped breathless, and perhaps dying, upon a seat, the judge thought the time for him to move had certainly arrived.

So did the quasi George Brown.

He uttered briefly something which sounded half like a curse, and half like a command. Then, there was a crash of firearms, and a rain of bullets, under which Jackson Shaw appeared to be swept to the floor.

It was done in the second or two of time which Sanford was wasting in thought. After that there was no hesitation, or delay. Before the men of the Bend had time to consider and decide, the five were breasting their way in a solid body through the crowd.

Out through the door they pushed, and as a yell from those left behind arose and pealed out they were mounted on their horses and urging them down the street, while behind them streamed a mocking laugh from their leader.

The sudden action, combined with the confusion caused by the messenger from the house, confounded the crowd, and before the movement was understood, or could be interrupted, it was a success.

The judge was the one who first made a decisive move.

"Look after things here, Jimmy, and two or three of you boys stay to see him out if they come back on him! The rest of you fall in. I was afraid something of the kind might come, and I thought I had made it safe, but they have got away with me sure enough."

First he spoke to the bartender, and then to the crowd; but he waited for no answer from either, and dashed away, with his revolver in his hand, though it was not likely he would find any use for it.

He had a little further to go than the rest, and so was caught in the crowd which went swarming through the door, but once on the street and he lost no time in getting at the procession. Behind him only half a dozen men were left—and Jackson Shaw was not one of them.

The Stranger Sport knew a thing or two, and had caught on to the situation more promptly even than "George Brown, of Walnut Bar."

The work at Sanford's house, whatever it was, must be over by this time, and if these five men were here on mischief they would not delay another instant. He connected the two things together, and as the words left the leader's lips Shaw dropped to the floor, barely in time to avoid the snap shots he knew were coming.

Before he could throw up his hands for a bead on them the men were so mingled with the throng it would have been folly to have risked a shot. He sprung to his feet just as Vince Doyle made a step forward; and he covered the gambler by a quick-acting instinct.

"Not this time, Nippers. It looks unhealthy here, but so far I haven't caught the epidemic; look out that it don't hit you."

The sternly spoken words were still low enough not to reach the ears of any save the ones for which they were intended. Doyle shrugged his shoulders.

"If Dan Garland wants to play a lone hand around Red Bend he must expect to take his chances; and find mighty many of them. It's not been any circus of mine, though. If you don't believe me, run me in."

It took nerve to act the part which Nippers was acting, because he knew well enough that Jackson Shaw had more than a suspicion he was in the pay of Captain Hardhand, if not actually one of his gang. And if this was Dan Garland, then, he knew too, the famous detective had neither fear nor mercy when he was acting within his pro-

vince as a man of the law. And though seldom recognized when on the trail, he had more than once done desperate work when some one tried to run in between him and the prey of which he never let go.

"Thanks for the offer, Nippers, but your time has not come yet; and may be if I see the way to use you, it will not come this heat at all. But remember that all the time I am watching you, and if I ever see it has to be done you will drop only too quick."

The talk took only a moment, but by the time it was finished the room was comparatively empty. Shaw took no further notice of the gambler spy, nor did he seem aware of the fact that those who were left were looking at him after a curious fashion. He hurried out, and followed in the direction of Judge Sanford's house.

The crowd was some distance ahead, and on a run; it looked as though he would have trouble in overtaking them before they reached the house, yet he did not hurry. There were enough in the lead to attend to any work they might find to do, and he was keeping a sharp eye around as he went along.

In that he was destined to find his profit.

At least, he thought he could make his profit out of it, though he had more than contempt for the man who suddenly came gliding to his side.

"Steady now, pard, and listen a little to reason. You and I couldn't run together in double harness on some tracks, but couldn't we just make a team on this?"

Jackson Shaw turned quickly at sound of a voice that was familiar, even though he could not at once call its owner.

A single glance satisfied him.

"Bright John, is it? Perhaps you set up the game in the Big Pocket. If you think your show for ten thousand is certain you could afford to pay big money to some men who would take big risks getting me out of the way. I swear, I don't know whether to shoot you or shake you."

"If that's your game, Dan Garland—"

"Steady yourself! Jackson Shaw, if you please."

"It don't make any difference what the name is. Shaw may go just as well as Garland, for all I know; but you are the detective just the same. You have the nerve, and I have the knowledge just now, and if we can't pool our capital say so, and I'll play the game out alone."

"What in the name of Heaven are you mooning about? Spit it out, or clear yourself out. I've no time to waste."

Yet, Shaw knew that he was stopped for a purpose; and that when it was explained it would seem important enough in his eyes to justify the action.

"Don't hurry me up too fast for the thing can keep, even if you don't know it."

"What thing?"

"That's telling till I know whether you are going to tote fair. I have had my eyes and ears open, and haven't missed much of what was going on. I know you are Stella Marvin's man, and if there is big money going there you will get the heft of it. But if you promise I shall have what the work is worth I'll help you out a little right now."

Jackson Shaw's fist went back a trifle, and John Bright's head was within reach. It was a narrow thing of it that he the smaller man did not drop then and there. If Shaw had hit as hard as he knew how there might have been a broken neck.

The Stranger Sport restrained himself, however.

"There has been something going on over at the house, and if I had not thought you knew something about it I wouldn't have been wasting time with you. I'll make you this offer. If you and I can do anything for Mrs. Marvin, I'll leave her to decide what it is worth, and you shall have every cent of it. Now, speak up. And if you don't do it quick, you'll need a doctor."

"Fair bargain, and I'll close right now. Maybe you know my sand is a little out of color; but there's no discount on the way I get to the rights of things. I have been scouting around a bit in the brush and I heard just what sort of a game was laid out, and can put you onto it. Five of his gang were to get the drop on you at the Big Pocket and do you for good. Three more at

the same time were to try for the woman, and if they got her were to carry her off while the racket was going on. The gang was to meet at the Diamond Drill Mine, if they got away with your luggage. If not, the five were to lay for you at the edge of the town, on the chance you would follow, while the rest went on to wait for them out on the mountain. That's the whole scheme."

The story was reeled off without a moment's hesitation, and with an air of truth that carried conviction.

"Nice little game, that. What do they expect to make by it?"

He asked the question absently, for, in fact, he was running over the state of affairs, and deciding what it was best for him to do.

"That's the part I didn't get to hear, and I guess you know better than I do. What you going to do about it? Get a gang?"

"Not this evening. If you want to go in with me—and I suppose you do—we'll head off the three and settle with them before the five get tired waiting, and tail in behind. I know you are something of a shot, but I don't need you. If you draw pay it will be for what you have told me. If there are only three in the ring, I am able for them myself."

Jackson Shaw was thinking aloud rather than uttering a braggart speech, and so the smaller man understood him.

"That's just what. If I spread my news where would I make my pile; and I can't work the racket alone. If you mean business it's time now to be moving. They'll hang on for a bit, but they won't wait on us all night."

Shaw touched his revolvers to make sure they were all right, and then started off without delay. He was something like Bright in his notions. He was willing to take some risks for the sake of not having too many in the crowd; and after having faced five men with the chances in their favor he would hardly fear three when he expected things to be the other way.

He knew there was quite a journey before him, but it was one which had to be taken on foot, so that he did not hesitate. It was possible his companion might find it something of a task, but for himself he knew that so far as time was concerned he would lose little though the toil would be greater. He would be free to take the shortest route, which would lead him over ground he had been forced to explore that very day.

The two got away ahead of the crowd from the saloon, which, in part at least, was surging back with cries telling they had made some unwelcome discovery.

What it was Jackson Shaw believed he knew; and he did not care to wait to give them a hint, though it might have set them on the trail, and perhaps worked for his own benefit. With elbows held squarely at his waist, and hands clinched, he set the pace at a rapid trot, and Bright hung close in his wake.

They had a good three miles of a journey before them, but they were on the short line, and Shaw never for a moment allowed himself to feel nervously anxious, not even when they had crossed the river, and scrambled up the mountain-side.

The Diamond Drill was at hand, and at a little distance he could hear voices in the darkness. He turned to his companion for a word of caution, and at that moment there was a quick motion of Bright's arm, and a noose dropped over his shoulders, and pinioned his arms to his side. A swift and powerful jerked pulled him from his feet. Jackson Shaw at last had been cleverly trapped.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE JUDGE GETS A SURPRISE.

At the judge's house there was some confusion, and a search which did not develop much.

The other guard was not to be found, for he had run away when the danger began, and had not yet thought it wise or safe to come back.

With a shouted order to stay out, and look around for sign, the judge bounded into the house, though he scarcely expected to find any one there.

The rooms were empty, but his quick glance took in the apparent fact that intru-

ders had been there. The safe was locked, but a desk was open, and some papers lay near it, scattered on the floor. Whether anything of value in that line could have been taken seemed just then of too little importance for him to inquire. Stella was missing.

A glare from without could be seen through the windows, and he heard a shout. No doubt some one had started a fire or lit a torch, and the trail had been found. Without waiting to pick up the papers he hurried out.

A trail had been found, or traces of it, but it was not so easy to determine which way it pointed. Some time more was lost; and in that time Jackson Shaw had held his conference with the man who had betrayed him, and had started to aid Mrs. Marvin.

"No use, I'm afeared," said a man by the name of Horton, who was an old trailer.

"They know ther roads a heap sight better than honest men, an' now the start is made I guess they'll keep a-goin'. Unless they hold on fur us ter git up, an' then give us a fight we can't git two mile afore ther trail'll blind, an' we kin spend ther rest ov ther night a-lookin' fur it."

Sanford knew the truth of this, but was not altogether hopeless.

"Boys, I don't know what they have done, but we have got to know if we follow them through the Red Sea. If Horton can pick out three or four to throw around for the trail, and follow it up, he can keep them sort of in sight till the rest of us catch up, and maybe run them into a hole. I have the coin to make it worth while, and there will be lots of chance to show good will besides."

"That's about ther way ter talk it, jedge," answered Horton, filling his mouth with a fresh supply of tobacco, and taking a far-away glance along the trail.

"Hold 'em back tell we git started, an' after that I kin keep trottin' along. But it ain't no use ter try ter think ov ketchin' 'em an' hevin' a fout over it afore sunrise. I bin thar afore. They'd be more than apt ter scoop us in ther dark; an' ef we dropped ary one on ther other side ov ther line it'd be ther lady ez we're goin' ter resk'y."

"Right you are. I know how it is myself. Get into line your men, and it will be fifty apiece for every day they are on the work. There will be a dozen more of us on the trail as soon as we can get things in shape. Hardband has started a game once too often. This time we'll be taking him in."

"Taking who in?"

At the sound of that voice every man there gave a start, and for a moment there was no answer.

Then, Sanford stepped forward, exclaiming:

"Good heavens, Stella! Where did you come from? How did you manage to get away?"

"I don't know that it required any particular management, for there was no one in my region to get away from; though it seems fortunate I was not here. I have heard more than I have seen, I assure you, and did not make much out of it. You have had visitors again. What have they taken?"

"I was afraid they had taken you," answered the judge, bluntly.

"If you want to take midnight strolls, you had better leave word at the office before you start. It turned out just as well that you were away, but it might have cost more good money than I care to throw away if you hadn't turned up when you did."

"Then, ther job are off?" put in Horton, who had delayed his departure to see what this new arrival might mean.

"Can't say but what I'm jest ez glad. It war big wages, but thar war big risks, an' I warn't runnin' 'em all fur ther coin ez war in it."

"Thanks, Horton; I know that," responded the judge, looking anxiously after his sister, who had swept through the door without further delay.

"If there is any army to be raised it won't start before to-morrow morning, and I'll let you know in time to be in the front rank of the skirmishers. If you'll all adjourn to the Big Pocket, I'll follow you a little later; and meantime you can tell Jimmy that you all are free of the house till I get there. You have stood by me like men, and I'll be all

the time after this looking around for a way to return the compliment."

There was something more than mere wages in the invitation and the way it was made, and the crowd gave a cheer, for the most part moving off without further question.

One or two lingered to return congratulations, and then the judge was left to enter the house, and question the lately missing lady as to what she had been doing, and, perhaps, how she had escaped.

The judge was in no good humor, if the truth be told. For all the months he had resided in Red Bend, he had remained at peace with the world, save as little professional difficulties had brought him temporary troubles.

But they had always been decided on the spot. His house had been a castle which had never been attacked until this sister of his had made her appearance, and it began to look as though there was going to be a very lively state of warfare around it.

He did not intend to go back from the support of his sister, but he wanted to know whether there was not some way in which a peace could be patched up, and if not, to know the reason why.

When he entered the house he found his sister had thrown herself down on her couch, with her hands clasped under her head, and lying there with a listlessness which seemed to betoken total exhaustion.

"Well," he said, looking at her cynically.

"Well, yourself," she answered, with something like spitefulness.

"You have a brilliant way of looking after my safety. If I had been depending on that truck you put on guard I might have been carried off half a dozen times over before they would have found it out. And when they just heard a pistol crack they ran away like frightened deer. Oh, you have men of sand here. It makes me weep when I think of them."

It was true, what she said, yet Sanford was not pleased to hear it. There was more than a touch of spitefulness in it, and he answered sharply:

"When you tie a man's hands behind his back you can't expect him to make a half-way decent fight. If I had my way I'd clear up the matter in a way that would either solve the mystery, or let you out of it. Say the word and I'll go gunning for your spouse, and won't come back till I bring his scalp."

"Perhaps you wouldn't come back at all. If you did, how would it help me to clear my skirts?"

"I don't see how you are doing that the way you are running things. Hands on the board, now. What is the game to be? If you are after revenge I don't blame you, and wouldn't mind helping you get it. If you only want to get evidence that will let you out of the mix you ran away from, good again. If there is any wealth in the bushes, right enough. You ought to have it. But to get all three the safest way is to drop him in his tracks right where you can find him; and if you try anything else you will come out of the little end of the horn. How is it to be? I can't stand it to have you in danger every hour you live here, and I won't have you driven away. Shall I start on the trail to-morrow?"

"No, no! Harm him at your peril! Sooner than see that I would—"

She hesitated, not from fear, but because it seemed that she might have gone a little too far.

The judge was leaning forward, staring at her with an expression of more than anger on his face.

"I swear," he began.

"I almost suspected."

"What?"

"That you are not Stella at all."

"Who said that I was?" was her cool, and somewhat defiant answer.

"But I am your sister, all the same."

CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. MARVIN MAKES A MISTAKE.

MRS. MARVIN was really not in the house at the time the trouble began in the town. So far as she was concerned the marauders had full swing at the house of her brother,

and she knew nothing of what was going on at the Big Pocket Saloon. She was attending to her own affairs, after her own way.

How it came that she was away would not be hard to explain, though the judge had received no hint of it. She had been offered an appointment for that evening, and had taken it without the least hesitation.

A letter had been found by her on her table, though she had not the least idea how it got there.

It was addressed to her, and at first sight the handwriting on the envelope appeared to be totally unfamiliar.

That fact had no influence with her, though at another, and more favorable time she would have paid little if any attention to an anonymous letter. She opened it, read it, and at once became more excited than Stella Marvin was apt to find herself.

Its contents were brief, but as she thought she knew well enough how to read between the lines she believed she understood it only too well.

This was what it said:

"MRS. MARVIN:—

You are trying to get too much, and unless you are willing to compromise you will lose all. If you want to make sure your own safety, and bring about an equitable division of those things you know of, your only chance is now. Meet the writer of this tonight at nine, and come alone to the spot where Dan Garland took your part when you were insulted. Your safety will be absolute; and you may learn truths about a matter in which you were mistaken. They will surprise you.

"A FRIEND."

She looked the letter over again, paying particular attention to the handwriting, and though it still proved unfamiliar, it seemed to her that it was evidently disguised.

"It is from him," she thought.

"I can understand that in view of failure, all along, on his part, he must think it will pay him to compromise; but what does he mean by hinting about certain proofs which may surprise me?

"Is it a game to catch me; or can I have been mistaken about—that—that woman?"

She lost her coolness at the thought. Wronged in other things she may have been—robbed of name, a fugitive from so-called justice, in danger of the rope, a hider in the wilderness, but she only set her teeth tightly and grew cold with wrath when she thought of that other woman behind it all.

"I will go!" she suddenly exclaimed.

"It is from him, and I will meet him as he asks. Perhaps I may even compromise if he can explain. But if he brings me face to face with her, I will kill them both!"

She shook her hand aloft as though registering an oath, and then prepared to meet her brother calmly at the supper table.

He got no hint of what was in her mind; and if her face showed that there was something troubling her, she covered it over with a lament that Hop Ling, who had disappeared the previous evening, had not yet made his appearance, and had not been heard of in the town.

She waited patiently until dark. There were few preparations to make, and having looked carefully at the revolver which she always carried, she finally slipped out, and made her way toward the edge of the town without attracting any attention.

So far as she knew not a living soul had seen her to recognize her, and it was very doubtful if the eyes of any man had rested on her at all.

After passing the scattering houses at the outskirts the way seemed more than ever lonesome, but Stella never hesitated, though from time to time she gave a quick glance around her. The ground was familiar, and there was little chance here for an ambuscade, but she was not altogether reckless.

If there was danger she wanted to get a glimpse of it at the first possible moment.

When she reached the spot where Nippers had undertaken to intercept her all was silent, and there was no one to be seen.

She was not surprised, for she had believed that she would be first at the rendezvous, and had hoped that such would be the case.

She drew a little aside, so as not to be

easily seen by any one approaching, and crouching down in silence, waited.

Perhaps half an hour had elapsed before she heard a light footfall coming from the direction of the mountain.

It did not seem altogether familiar, yet that was not strange, for the approaching feet dropped with caution; and it had been some time since those footsteps had fallen on her ear. Her heart beat a little faster, perhaps, but she gave no sign as the man approached.

He halted not a dozen yards from the hidden woman, and looked toward the town.

"Not here, yet," the man muttered; "yet, if I know her, she will come. She will feel there will be no danger to which she will not be exposed even if she refuses the meeting, and that hint of what may be learned will bring her. I think it would bring her out of her grave. Of all women a jealous woman is the worst."

"Thank you, Mr. Marvin," she said, suddenly rising up, and taking a few steps forward.

Her hand was on her weapon, and she was warily searching the shadows, yet she had no real fear of any immediate attack.

"Perhaps I am a fool to have granted what all reason tells me is not intended for my benefit, but I could not resist giving you a last chance. You have been cruel, and vile, and false, but I cannot forget that you were once my husband."

"And would be still, if I was not dead."

The man turned lazily, and threw the words at her with an insolence she remembered of old.

"You liar, you shameless liar!" she exclaimed hotly.

"You could be willing to go away and leave me under that imputation. You would have allowed my neck to stretch the rope, and would have rather gloried in having it done. Had I not found you out I would indeed have been a widow and yet a wife."

"Still liable to ride the high horse on short notice," laughed the man.

"Suppose we consider all that said and get right down to business. I am trusting myself a good deal further with you than I ever thought I would trust a human being again, but I want to get this mess over and done with it. Then, you can go your way, and I will go mine; and I hope to Heaven we will never meet again."

"No one is more anxious to come to what you call 'business' than myself; and first of all I want to take my head away from under the shadow of the scaffold. I must prove that you have been seen alive, and in the best of health, after the night when your bones were supposed to have been found in our burned mansion, and all the world shouted that it was my hand wrought your death."

"Not so easy to do, perhaps, as you may think. It might be just as hard for me to explain about those same bones, or that you had left the dwelling of your husband some little time before the accident occurred. You see, my dear, there were two people with tempers got together when we were joined, and the outcome has been something of a puzzle."

"Wretch! You have left me to suffer, if so it can be arranged, the penalty of your crimes. I am fighting for my life, since I know you are directing the law against me. Had it not been for the lure in my hands you would only be too glad to abandon me to the fate your own schemes have brought."

"Right you are, Stella dear. That same lure has brought me again to your feet. A man will go a good ways for half a million, and that, I believe, is about the size of it. Come now, I'll make you a fair offer. You put it in my hand and I will make it an absolute certainty to the world at large and the courts of law that in spite of certain threats you made you did not murder your husband. I know you have the coin somewhere, but deuce take me if I can get on to it exactly."

"And never will. It is mine and you know it. It was made through the investment of my own little capital in the days before we swung so far apart. I managed it. I made it. And I put it away where no one else will ever find it, even if I do not call for it till the end of time."

"Consider a husband's rights, my love, to

say nothing of your own safety. What is half a million by the side of freedom. Seriously speaking, there are complications of which you know nothing, that have driven me to this place of refuge, from which I cannot escape without some such sum as that you have so snugly salted down. I intend to have it, and if you do not accept your own safety in return for it I will take it anyhow, and leave you to look out for yourself. That means death for you."

He spoke in a hard, cruel way. There was no mercy in his tone, and his wife took a step backward as she spoke.

"I am not anxious to throw my life away, but sooner than give over to you the wealth which is absolutely mine, to spend with a woman who has in the past robbed me of the things which make life worth living, I would die. Fair warning. So far I have thought to save both of us. Now, so long as life is in the balance it is a fight to the death between us, and I shall show no mercy."

Marvin laughed coldly.

"Ha, ha! The woman in the case is the bitterest of all. She is a brilliant baggage, and that is a fact. Let me give you more than a hint. The lady in question has been true as steel, but she is with me no longer. She grew tired of posing without a better audience, and has gone back to civilization. At present she is installed in your brother's house, and if you would return you would find no place for you there. All I am afraid of is that she will corral that little deposit of yours in some eastern vault, and that neither of us will ever hear of her or it again. And yet, she would hardly do that. She has stayed by me too long to doubt her now."

The latter part of this was said in a reflective tone. Had Stella wished to interrupt him there was plenty of opportunity between the words.

She did not, however. The story he told was absolutely too stunning for belief, and yet—how could she doubt it? She only stared at him while he went on:

"I expected a burst of denial, but it is just as well you believe. I am saying nothing but the truth, and you can see how unfortunate it would be for you to return, to destroy the peace and quietness of your poor brother's mansion. Yes, she has left me. In her absence you surely will not object to come back to the arms of your doting husband. We will have time to talk over all these matters of compromise before she returns. Bring her along, Tiny."

He snapped his finger and thumb, and then folded his arms.

Stella had made a desperate effort to throw up the muzzle of the pistol she had been holding concealed under her cloak, but it was too late.

Around her from behind descended two other arms that clasped her like bands of steel, and the weapon was wrenched away from her fingers.

"No nonsense now, not a sound! We are not out of the woods I admit, but if trouble comes there will be a corpse, and we will not be carrying it."

Mrs. Nevin made no useless outcry or struggle. She recognized that at this moment either would be in vain.

With only a word of consent she followed her captors, who led her from the spot.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DRUGGED AND ROPE.

DURING the time which had elapsed since the retiracy of Captain Hardhand to his cabin, under stress of sickness, Woolly West had been running things about after his own wishes, and nobody had thought it worth his while to say nay.

There had been considerable business going on, though it was not exactly of the regular, road-agent kind. As Woolly had hinted to the royal rustler, it was paid for on a fixed basis of charges; and as that was liberal of its sort there had been no grumbling in default of regular occupation.

As for Red Hot Rube, he occupied an anomalous position, but that did not trouble him.

After that first night ride with Woolly West he had the freedom of the camp,

though he could see that he was not admitted very deeply into its counsels. The men talked to him freely enough, and when they moved their quarters the following day he went along with them as a matter of course.

Yet, he was not deceived, nor was he off his guard. There was a constant watch kept on him, vailed though it was by apparent exhibitions of good fellowship. That he was taken along in the expedition which ambushed Jackson Shaw the afternoon he started out to buy into the Diamond Drill appeared to be more a matter of chance than intention, though he succeeded in coming so prominently to the front.

After that, it looked as though he was getting in on the ground floor for a time; and the way in which he had captured the lurker whom he privately recognized as John Bright, the detective, seemed to raise him several notches in the estimation of Woolly, and his young pard.

The prisoner, Riley, the Kid, as he called himself, went along without demur; and with a courage that was remarkable after hearing the announcement which Rube whispered into his ear.

It may have been there was a momentary paling of his cheek, and a catching of his breath, but if so it was noticed by no one besides the rustler; and he was over it before a less observant man would have had time to see the shaft had struck home.

"Don't try any of your tricks on me," was the somewhat surly answer.

"I'm just Riley the Kid, and no one else. If you think I'm not the genuine article, you can try me out any way you want to and I'll stand the proof."

"All right," retorted Rube, carelessly.

"Ett ain't my fun'ral. I war on'y jest a-thinkin'. Let ther boys fix ett up with yer ter suit 'emselves, an' I ain't a-kickin'. But I'll give ett to yer straight. Don't yer be in ary too great a hurry 'bout seein' ther boss. Ef yer kin, leave that tell yer sees how ther land lays."

"Maybe I won't; but, all the same, I'll be keeping an eye on you, Mister Man. Looks as though you and I wouldn't be the best of friends. I give you fair warning back. Try any gum games and you drop."

Woolly West turned his gaze on the speakers, and perhaps heard something of what they said, though he had nothing to remark. Riley only stepped along a little more jauntily than ever, while Rube gave no sign that he was angered by the defiance.

Little more was said during the rest of the journey, and by the time they reached the lurking place of the outlaws evening was coming on fast, and supper was in order.

The sight of the prisoner created no excitement in the camp, and Woolly vouchsafed no explanation. He simply spoke a few words to one of the outlaws, in a low tone, and then turned Riley over to him.

Of course, the new-comer was treated as a prisoner, but it was without harshness or threat. He was simply sent off by himself under guard, and was allowed to stay a remarkably good appetite with a substantial supper.

"Reckon you'll want ter figger up ther rest ov ther leetle contrack we war a-makin'," said Rube, as he sauntered up to West, an hour or so later.

"Ther blamed gerloot bu'sted in so sudden we didn't git our talk out, an' I want ter know ef the biz are goin' ter pay fur waitin' on it. Ef you kin take me in right off ther han'le, I want ter know ett, an' when we'll be gittin' ter work. Don't want ter be waitin' on no boss ter say so afore ther barg'in' kin be bound."

"Thort we hed that all settled down thar," growled Woolly.

"Work are goin' ter begin afore you'll be riddy fur it, maybe. Yer too all-fired anxious fur a stranger. Cherry an' I hev 'bout made up our minds ter leave yer out unless you kin show us that y'e'r ther pure quill."

"An ain't I bin showin' ov it ever sence yer sot eyes on me? What better kin I do than I've bin a-doin'?"

"Don't ett strike you that ye'r' too squeamish, pard?"

The question was horribly suggestive, but it did not make the rustler falter.

"Jest so fur, thet when I'm dealin' with a man ez thinks I'm his friend I never throw

off on him 'thout fair warnin', an' I don't pull behind a feller's back. Ef I send him over ther range I want him ter know who sent him, an' hev a toler'ble reason why. Ez fur ary thing else—try me."

"Do yer think that chap ez calls hisself Riley are ther squar' article?"

"Don't know ez I do, an' don't know but thet I do. What's thet got ter do with ther lay-out?"

"He's a blamed spy. That's what. Mebbe he's after us, an' mebbe he's after you; but either way he ought ter sail up ther flume. Are you willin' ter set him adrift?"

"Ef he's after me let him put on the rope soon ez he kin find ther chance. I kin keer fur my own neck every day in ther year, an' I ain't kickin' beforehand. Let him flicker. But, ef he's a spy, thet's s'uethin' else. Prove ett an' I'm willin' ter treat him like a spy, accordin' ter law an' custom. An' when I git through with him he'll be done with ther job fur good."

"That sounds like ther real thing. We'll find him out afore mornin', an' we ain't makin' no move tell we do. Then we'll let yer know, an' you kin make yer word good. Better dry up now, an' not let ther boys see us chinnin'. They might think thar was somethin' in ther wind, an' git oncomfortable."

Several of the men were approaching, though it was hard to say whether they were urged by curiosity or not.

As though in continuation of something he had been saying, Woolly drew a flask from his hip-pocket, and tendered it to the rustler.

"Drink hearty fur a night-cap," he said, in a friendly tone.

"Then yer kin turn in. Ther boys will keep watch, an' we won't want you tell toward mornin'. Be ready then."

The action was natural, and Rube had no reason for refusing a drink. He placed the flask to his lips, and lowered the contents quite perceptibly.

Then, he went out and looked after Firebug, and on returning threw himself down on his blanket and closed his eyes.

Drowsiness soon overtook him. His breath came regularly and in long-drawn inspirations. Before he knew he was turning the corner he was asleep.

Quite a time elapsed before Rube, the rustler, awakened from that slumber, and when he did he was for the moment bewildered.

It was not much wonder, either.

He was not lying just without the glare of a camp-fire, but all around was darkness.

That of itself would not have caused him any uneasiness, but as he yawned, and tried to stretch himself, he found he was bound hand and foot.

A moment later there came to him the knowledge that he had a peculiar, bad taste in his mouth.

"Drugged an' roped, by mighty!" was his exclamation, as he tried to struggle up into a sitting posture, and pierce the surrounding darkness.

"Whar ther thunder be I, an' who done ther trick?"

There came no answer, and almost immediately he recovered his full amount of wits, and after that spoke no more aloud.

It did not take him long to discover that his wrists were strongly and securely tied together, and that his ankles were in the same fix.

Beyond that he was free to move his body as he chose, or even to roll away from the spot.

By a little effort he reached his waist with his elbow and made out that the belt of arms which had been around him when he lay down was no longer there. Surely, he was a prisoner, though why, or what was to be done with him, were matters he did not care to consider.

The first thing to discover was whether there was any chance for him to get away from the spot in fighting shape.

The work seemed to have been thoroughly well done, yet the rustler knew there was always a chance if time and opportunity was granted, and he seemed to have plenty of both at his disposal. He listened a moment without hearing a sound, and then began to strain steadily, and systematically at his bonds.

"Thought so," he chuckled, as he observed the cords slacken somewhat after a rest from one of these efforts.

"Thar's a heap ov differen's how yer puts ther strain on, an' who hez tied ther knots in. Woolly, ef you played me ther trick p'rhaps you ain't ez smart ez yer thinks fur. I'll be with yer in ther mornin'."

It had been altogether chance on his part, but when his wrists were forced together they had not reached the snuggest point of contact, but lay in parallel lines. Now, when he turned them slightly, the bonds loosened still more. He contracted his hands for a supreme effort; and slipped them through the ring of rope.

"Must a' thought ther drug war a heap sight stronger, er this old head real lots softer. Shows ther good 'tenshuns, though. Didn't want ter hurt a bit more ner they hed to. I'll remember that an' won't let drive onless I hez ter. Ther rest'll be like pickin' peaches."

Under the manipulation of his strong fingers the cords at his ankles soon gave way, and he rose to his feet.

He straightened and rubbed his limbs, to restore the circulation, which had been pretty well interfered with, and then felt in his pockets. Their contents had been left undisturbed, and the only things missing were his arms. He found the wax matches he was looking for, and at once struck a light.

The flame was not great but it enabled him to see something of his surroundings. He was in a cave, or something of the kind. He saw, too, on the wall his own belt of arms, which had been strung around a sharp point of rock.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JOHN BRIGHT MAKES AFFIDAVIT.

JACKSON SHAW had been very cleverly roped.

The Sport had been somewhat on the lookout for treachery, yet he did not think it would come in this shape. He had believed Bright could be depended on until he thought the game he was after could be corralled, and up to that time would be true enough.

But there was one thing which, until the instant the rope fell, Shaw had never thought of. He might be mistaken in his man.

About the time the Sport's hands were securely knotted behind his back, and a lead line arranged around his neck, he began to comprehend he had fallen into as pretty a little trap as could have been set for him.

Before he knew it he was moving on between two men, having obeyed the orders given by them in a mechanical sort of fashion, but his wits were coming back to him with rapidity, and he soon knew he had sustained no real damage. He walked without effort, and his brain was clear enough to distinguish distinctly the sound of footsteps behind him. These footsteps he fancied belonged to the false John Bright, and as a first move he thought it likely he would test the truth of his suspicion. Without turning his head he called out in a tone not incautiously loud:

"A nice game, Bright, and you worked it to the queen's taste; but what do you think I will be doing when the hereafter comes?"

"Don't worry yourself about John Bright," replied a laughing voice.

"We'll attend to his case at the same time we do yours, and if either of you has anything to complain about it's that poor devil. You have given his snap away, and it's going to make things almighty bad for him. Better be saying prayers for yourself, Dan Garland."

"Dan Garland, nothing. You have made as bad a break as he did; but, I guess there is no use to try to show it to you till you get your eyes open a trifle wider."

"That's true, Danny. I'm afraid this is going to be your last deal. Our eyes are right comfortable as they are. If you should happen to get away, that would be a different matter. Now, dry up. You will have two chances to talk, by and by."

After that the quartette plodded on in silence. Jackson Shaw did not believe it would be judicious to hang back, and strode

along at a pace which accommodated itself to that of the rest of them

There was hardly room to doubt as to their intentions, and the only wonder to him was that they had not completed their work at once, without waiting to get beyond range of a possible expedition from the town. In either case their guilt would be the same, and the probability of punishment amounted to just as much. The only hope he could see was that they probably were not positive of his identity, and wanted to fix it beyond a doubt before turning him off.

That gave him a shadow of hope. While he did not believe that in any event they counted on sparing him, yet, if they waited until they could positively establish that he was other than he claimed to be, there would be meantime the chance of something arising to allow of his escape.

The trouble was that he himself had apparently done much to prejudge his case by the acknowledgment of the false John Bright. He thanked his stars he had called the impostor down when addressed as Dan Garland, but had doubts whether his manner had been decided enough to count much with these men, who had evidently pretty thoroughly made up their minds.

There was nothing to do but to keep a stiff upper lip, and if no way of escape offered itself to let them work their worst when they got ready.

Of course, he kept a close watch of his surroundings, and the freedom with which he was allowed to take them all in was by no means reassuring.

When, at last, the end of the journey was reached, even his magnificent muscles were tired, and he was glad enough to be allowed a time for rest. He threw himself down upon the hard rock, and made a regular business of recuperation.

Beyond a gruff order to remain where he was put until called for nothing was said; and he lay there apparently unnoticed, and almost alone.

There were only a couple men at the rendezvous when Shaw and his captors arrived, but it was not hard to infer from some words he overheard that more were expected, and that they were absent on some other expedition which seemed to have reference to making other prisoners than himself.

On that hint he easily reasoned out that Mrs. Marvin was one of the individuals sought, and that there was but little doubt she was after all in the hands of the detail looking for her. Why she had not already arrived he could not say, unless it was that she faltered by the wayside, or was unable to stand a journey still longer than the one which had so greatly exhausted him.

"Perhaps it is just as well I didn't get my eyes opened before the coup was made," he thought to himself.

"I might have played smash with the game against me, but I doubt if I could have got on the carpet again in time to have helped her. This way I am certainly all here, and if they don't find they have scooped in a pretty good hand full before they get done with us I don't know quite as much about Jackson Shaw as I think I do. I'll go mighty slow till I find what sort of a layout they are going to spread, and whether Stella is going to have a hand dealt her in the game."

The result was, he composed his limbs and his nerves so thoroughly that he was more than half asleep when he was approached by a couple of the outlaws, who were masked, and carried drawn pistols in their hands.

"Sorry ter interrupt yer comfort, pard, but ther boss needs yer in the other room. You'll sc'assly want us ter kerry yer?"

"Not a bit of it, my friends. 'Most any place will be better than this place, and that same boss is the man I am just yearning to see."

He arose promptly, and followed his guides.

Perhaps they were just a trifle afraid of him, bound though he was, since they watched him like hawks, and at a movement that might have seemed suspicious they would have riddled him with bullets.

Yet, they were not at all gruff, or rough. They were rather in high good humor, and the reason of that was, some coins in their pockets which jingled as they walked and certain promises of more.

The room from which they left Shaw was apparently only a little, outlying apartment, resembling the shed entrance to a mine. The hall into which he was taken was a dozen times larger in extent, and had something of the appearance of a court of justice. At one end a man was seated on a judge's bench. There was a bar, where a prisoner was already seated; and on one side were three men, who wore the important look of a jury.

Removed a few paces from them were others who might be the spectators and witnesses.

The crowd was not large, but if figures and equipments went for anything it was quite select.

The judge was none other than Woolly West.

This was the first time Jackson Shaw had ever seen him, so far as he could remember, but he was certain he would know him if they ever met again.

As for the prisoner, the first glance had shown Shaw it was Stella.

The judge gave a nod of approval as the second prisoner was brought before him.

Then, he turned to Mrs. Marvin.

"Madam, you'll be allowed ter stan' aside fur a leetle. Thar's a more 'mportant pris'ner afore ther court, an' p'rhaps ef yer sees how we treat sich a case you won't be quite so mulish yerself."

Whatever she may have thought of the address she made no answer, and without delay Shaw was installed in the place Stella had just vacated.

"Pris'ner at ther bar, what hev yer ter say why senten's ov death shouldn't be pronounced on yer?"

The tones came from behind a mask, and were sepulchral enough, but they struck no terror to the soul of the sport.

"Probably, nothing at all," was his firm answer.

"It is generally allowed a prisoner a chance to defend himself before either a conviction is established, or a sentence is pronounced. What is my crime?"

"Ther crime ov bein' a savage hound, too cruel ter live. You hev kim hyar ter stick yer fangs in throats ez b'long ter human bein's, an' they hev got ter say whether they'll die, er you. In a fair fight we're willin' ter meet ther world; but fur slinkin', treacherous hounds, a-hidin' behind ther mask ov honest sports tell they kin make ther's spring, we ain't no mercy."

There was a murmur of applause as the cold words dropped from the mouth of the speaker. His hearers, all but Jackson Shaw, and the woman who was crouching at one side, were evidently in sympathy with him.

"I don't say that it would be all right if I were such a man. That is for you and the law to decide; but I want to say for myself, first, last, and all the time, that I don't fill the bill. I am neither a sleuth-hound, nor am I in disguise, and you can't bring any proof to the contrary of what I say. I am Jackson Shaw, simply, and you meddle with me at your peril."

The sport straightened himself up as he spoke, and gazed defiantly at the judge.

"You got to a court, Dan Garland, whar bluff won't win. We know yer ez I've named yer, an' hev laid it down thet you'll never run on another trail. Every man hez a right ter protect himself, an' ther only way we got is ter doom yer ter death."

"Dan Garland, nothing! Prove it."

"We don't need ter. You hev give yerself away. But even a dog o'rt ter be treated squar', an' we'll give it to yer, straight goods, afore we turn yer off. Bring in ther witness."

Shaw had no trouble in guessing who that witness was to be, though he was somewhat puzzled as to the circumstances which had led him within the jurisdiction of this court. It was no great surprise when John Bright made his appearance.

The detective looked the worse for wear, and as though his nerve had been pretty well broken, though he did not altogether crouch.

He looked the prisoner firmly in the face as he answered the question of the court.

"I can't tell a lie, and keeping silent would do no good. I am John Bright, the Pinkerton; and that gentleman there—I know not how you got him—is Dan Garland."

CHAPTER XXV.

RED-HOT RUBE CLAIMS HIS RIGHTS.

THE announcement of the detective created no sensation, since every person there was prepared to hear it, and there was only one of the spectators who doubted its truth.

Mrs. Marvin did not try to stop the popular verdict, but she started forward.

"No, no!" she exclaimed.

"It cannot be he is the detective. I say it, and I ought to know."

It was only a momentary manifestation of spirit. The next instant, as her guard put his hand warningly on her shoulder, she was her silent, reticent self again, watching eagerly the face of the prisoner, while listening to hear what he might have to say.

Jackson Shaw simply smiled. It was hardly worth while to answer since under the circumstances his word would hardly be taken against that of the detective, and he had no proofs to offer. He had not heard the words of Stella, and even if he had he would scarcely have desired to bring her forward. She no doubt had trouble enough of her own without attempting to help him bear any of his.

"No answer, eh? Thought that would stump you," sneered the judge.

"He's one of the same breed, but of the snappy kind, that hasn't any big danger ez long ez yer look a leetle out. We kin afford ter turn him loose an' let him bark his wu'st. Forty like him, in a gang, wouldn't be ez dangerous ez one Dan Garland. Are yer ready ter die?"

"Don't see that I have any choice in the matter. According to your say-so I'll have to die, ready or not. You have my hands tied, and all that is left to do is to knock me in the head. Let her went. I'll tell you one thing that may not make you feel so good. The real Dan Garland is somewhere in the neighborhood, and when he gets on the trail, as he will if this thing goes through, he'll swing you all."

"We'll tend to that. You hev heared, boys. Thar's no doubt that he's ther same Double Cinch Dan, an' it's him er us. Shell we send him over?"

It was a question which had its answer already determined, and it was something of a surprise when amidst the chorus of approvals there arose a single dissentient voice.

"Ef ther real boss war hyer I wouldn't say a word, and let her go at that; but he's on the sick list, an' after hearin' what he's said I ain't sure we better not hev him say a leetle more afore we make up our minds. Ef this ain't ther Double Cinch Dan we're lookin' fur, an' we make a break like we bin countin' on, he'll be blamed likely ter find us, an' yer know what that means. I move we make him talk some more."

"You'll make Dan Garland talk, will yer?" asked Woolly, in scorn.

"Try him ef yer wants to, but ef it war anybody but you I'd think thar war somethin' rotten behind it, an' say you better go along with him when ther end comes."

"Oh, I'm not kickin'," answered the man hastily.

"Ef you'uns kin stand it I guess I kin. Pass him over the range, but I don't want ter hev more ner my sheer in ther work."

"Dan Garland, you bin tried and condemned, and thar's only one route out ov this, an' that's by death. Stiddy boys, an' be r'ddy. It won't do ter give him a inch ov rope. He must drop whar he stands. Ef ther are a man kin show a shooter without an empty chamber in it, ef my voice kin put him thar he'll lay 'long side, a leetle later."

Woolly drew his revolver with a flourish; and each man there answered with a like motion. A dozen muzzles were pointing at the silent, frowning Jackson Shaw, when a man bounded into the apartment, with outstretched hands, each one of which grasped a six shooter.

The man was Rube the rustler.

He came rapidly, but he came with the silence of a panther; and before his presence was actually noted held one revolver at the head of Woolly, while the other was free to drop the first man who attempted to turn a muzzle his way.

"Hold hard, all ov yer! I'm yer solid friend; but I got a word er two ter say. Some one hez bin playin' roots on yer uncle

Reuben, an' he's hyer ter know ther why's an' wherefores. What's bin goin' on?"

There was a bustle and hum of excitement; but there was no other demonstration. Rube was a dangerous man to fool with, and they were not at all satisfied they wanted to put him out of the way.

What Woolly might have done had he been free to act is hard to say, but he was as quick to read a man as the best of them, and he saw the rustler was in earnest. He answered coolly:

"No roots war we tryin' ter play on yer, but jes' suthin' fur yer own good. This wasn't yer circus at all, an' we war tryin' ter leave yer out."

"Ah!"

Rube seemed to recognize the prisoner suddenly, and it was hard to interpret the monosyllable which dropped from his lips. Without paying further attention to the speaker, or the others who were behind him, he glided nearer, all the time looking curiously at Jackson Shaw.

"An' you war goin' ter take him outen ther wet 'thout lettin' me know what war goin' on. Ett's good I got hyer. Thar would hev bin mighty lively times ef you hed left me out ov ther fun. Why, he's my meat fur a hundred dollars. He's hyer ter run me down, an' ther third time are ther charm. I'll settle accounts with him now, sure."

He glared at the prisoner in a way that bespoke something more, even, than hatred, and the outlaws would have not been surprised to see him drop the captive before he had time for a word of answer.

Shaw did not seem alarmed. If a dozen leveled pistols could not cause him to blanch it was not likely one outlaw more would make much difference to him. He simply sneered back a defiance, and stood waiting for what would come next.

West did not seem inclined to feel troubled about the advent of the man he really had been supposing was a prisoner.

If words and manner went for anything he was rather pleased than otherwise at the unexpected which had happened.

"You kin hev him, pard, ef yer wants him. We did kinder leave you out fur fear yer wouldn't give him fair play, but he's got his judgement, an' you kin kerry it out ef yer wants to."

"That's what I reckon on doin'; but I ain't so sure, sence I've hed time ter cool off, thet I wants ter do it right hyer. I ain't bequainted ez well ez I might be with ther gang ez are lookin' on, an' I'd jest as soon yer dropped a curtain. Him an' me are ernuff fur witnesses."

"Do yer weaken?" asked Woolly, somewhat threateningly.

"Not much, Mary Ann. But it might be some ov ther boyees might, some day, ef they got under a pump. You kin give me this hyer room, only fur me an' him, er I'll take him to ther room you tried ter shut me up in. Then, leave us alone fur ten minutes, an' you kin come ag'in after that soon ez yer wants to. Yer won't find more ner one ov us thar; an' that one'll be me."

"The court ain't goin' ter 'bjet, but ett'll see thet he don't git away with yer baggage tell ye'r ready fur him. We have biz ov our own ter finish hyer, but you kin take him along, an' a couple ov ther boys'll go behind ter see ett's all right. Ef either ov yer don't stack up true they will down yer both."

Rube paid no attention to the threat couched in the words, and never seemed to think he was lending himself as a cat's paw to carry out some unpleasant work for men who did not feel altogether able to shirk it.

He caught the prisoner by the elbow.

"One ov you fellers give me ther advantage ova glim. An' Dan Garland—you kin along. Ett ain't fur ter go, an' one ov ther boyees kin kerry a lantern. You ain't goin' ter do me ary more tricks in ther dark."

The Stranger Sport nodded 'gravely; one of the men took a lantern; and the fate of the sport appeared to be decided against him.

Then, Woolly West stole silently to the side of Mrs. Marvin, and whispered:

"Yer see how this hyer gang works. What shell I tell ther boss fur you? Kin he make a dicker, er will he serve you ther same way we done Dan Garland?"

Stella shuddered, and drew herself together.

"Never. Do your worst to me but I'll never yield. And you will not kill Dan Garland. He will live, in spite of all, and avenge me."

"You thinks?" chuckled Woolly.

"It war a last chance ter see ef yer would play us fair. Mebbe we don't need yer quite ez bad ez yer think we do. What does yer say ov this?"

He held toward the light a key, and a paper which looked to be partly written and partly printed. They were the articles stolen from the safe a couple nights before, and which had been apparently lost.

"Where did you get them?" asked Stella, curiously, and without a tremor.

"Out ov John Bright's pocket. Ther leetle rat hez bin tryin' ter work a double cross, but when ther time comes we'll turn him loose. He can't do hurt er good, an' that style don't count."

CHAPTER XXVI.

RUSTLER RUBE HAS HIS WAY.

RUSTLER RUBE apparently had it all his own way, but he was aware it took a good man to hold his own with a gang like this, especially as a stranger.

He was allowed to march off the captive, because, from what had been seen in the past, it was pretty certain he would, for his own safety, dispose of him in just the way the men of Captain Hardhand desired.

But that there could be no mistake about it there was an escort at his back; and there was no certainty how soon that escort would take matters in hand, and shoot them both when he no longer faced them.

He took his chances with a cheerful readiness that went far toward endearing him to their hearts; and finally stood unhurt, almost on the spot where a short time before he had awakened to find himself bound hand and foot.

"Ef you please," he remarked, with as much sweetness as he could put into his somewhat rasping voice.

"I ain't a-doubt' yer good will, ter either ov us, but I ain't a-puttin' meself whar I kin be sold out until I hev a sheer in a right lively line ov profits all laid out an' waitin'. I'll run this hyer, an' you gents hed better keep out ov sight, an' perhaps ov hearin'."

The men to whom he turned, though they were at the moment covering him with their weapons, stepped back a pace or so, while the one who carried the lantern set it down upon the floor.

"Right you may be, pard, but thar's alders two sides ter most things, an' got ter be sure yer gives us straight goods, er you may be sellin' us out. Do ther job ther best way yer knows how, but we'll be comin' back ag'in ter see thet yer finished it 'cordin' ter Gunther. Sabbe? So-long."

He turned and went away, his two companions going with him; but they did not retreat far.

In the corridor-like passage of the cave, and near to the door of the section in which they had left the rustler and his destined victim, they had set a dimly-burning lantern, so that no one could emerge without being seen. Crouching down they watched and waited, with the tubes of three revolvers trained in one direction.

At that distance, they could all shoot within the circumference of a hat; and they could make it very unhealthy for any man, or two men, who might try to come out.

After a little they heard the report of a pistol, and then a smothered cry.

At the sounds they bounded up and went running back until they reached the opening which served as a door.

There they halted suddenly.

Within, all was darkness, and as they peered forward their own shadows were dimly limned by the lantern beside them.

Rustler Rube had thrown himself upon the floor, and his voice arose, though from what precise direction they could not determine.

"No snap games on this old hoss. Back thar, all ov yer, tell ye kim with yer hands up. I ain't a-trustin' ye, an' ef you crowd I'll shoot. What yer wantin' hyer?"

"Ter see ef Dan Garland hev gone over

ther range," answered the spokesman of the three.

"When we kin swear to yer nerve you'll kin in with us all on ther ground floor. You must 'a' knowed that Woolly's runnin' things while ther boss are off color, an' this war jest a tryin' ov ye."

"This time Dan are down ther flume, sure enough, but I don't mean yer ter see him on ther journey, er how he war turned adrift. I've got a hull hand full ov pitch ter handle, an' I'm keeping gloves on while I'm a-doin' ov it."

"An' we ain't a leavin' tell we see what's become ov him. After that, ef he's crooked, you kin go an' make it straight with Woolly ez soon ez yer hev a mind to."

"Not much, pard. You can't corner me in ther same room with a corpse. I'm a-step-pin' out right now, an' you kin clear ther way er go down, ez yer hev a mind to. You hear them whispers?"

Harshly from the blackness of the cave came the sound of the hammers of his revolvers thrust back, and as they clicked to a stand Rube rose up and strode forward.

The stranger had the better nerve, and these men knew it.

They were not quite so certain what Woolly wanted done, but they were aware it was not good for a subordinate to make any mistakes in such matters.

They shrunk back still further, and actually allowed the rustler to pass.

Then they stepped into the apartment he had just vacated, while the flame of their lantern shot up as they turned the wick.

"Ef yer wants ter find Dan Garland you kin look fur him down ther sink. Mebbe you kin find a spot ov blood er so on ther floor, but I ain't a-sayin' ther heft ov his corpus are down ther shaft."

These words he flung back after him, closing with a cruel laugh, as he strode away.

The men heard him, but they paid no attention. It was not the way to gain their love; and hardened though they were, and well enough satisfied that between the two men there was a fight which for one or the other must mean a finish, they shuddered at the thought of a cold-blooded killing.

They knew well enough to what he alluded when he spoke of the "sink."

In one corner of the apartment there was a huge crevice, or crack.

It ran along through the wall of rock, and it extended downward for what to them was an unknown depth. The edge to this was sharply defined, and the chasm had a side that was sheer. If Dan Garland had been cast down there, they would hardly need to explore its bottom, an unknown depth below.

There was an underground stream, which would sweep a body away, and it was not likely on this earth the body of the double-cinch detective would again be seen.

The man who carried the lantern trailed it slowly along the floor until, suddenly, he held it still over a single spot which showed darkly on the rock.

"Blood fur a dollar," he said; and without stopping to examine it further they went on.

Over the edge of the shaft they leaned, and listened, while the light was held 'as low down as an arm could reach.

There they could see nothing, save a hat which lay on the brink, and could hear nothing but the splash of water below.

CHAPTER XXVII.

JUDGE SANFORD HAS SEVERAL SURPRISES.

THE announcement made by the woman who had slipped into Mrs. Marvin's place, and who for the time being had even appropriated her name, was more than a surprise to Judge Sanford. Cool-blooded sport though he was, accustomed to taking all things as they came in the great game of life, he was actually overwhelmed by the shock.

He sunk back into a chair and stared at the woman, who so coolly told him a truth which he could not altogether believe, and yet which he could understand.

"My sister?" he gasped, and with a question in the gape.

"It can't be so—and yet it may. How do you know?"

The woman rose and glided toward him, putting out one bronzed, but delicate hand.

"Don't you know? Can't you guess? Do you remember nothing of Viola?"

Her voice had lost its defiant ring, and she stared into his eyes after the fashion of one who was feasting on a pleasant sight, long yearned for.

"By heavens! It may be. Yet, who would have believed it? And what are you doing here?"

"Resting along the road, my own dear brother," was the answer given with a slight laugh.

"As reckless as ever, I see," he answered, clasping his hands around her, and gazing long and earnestly in her face.

"There can be no mistake about it. It is years since I had a glimpse of that face but I could never forget it altogether, though it has changed some. You do not look as though the world had gone altogether wrong with you, either."

"You bet it hasn't," was the light answer.

"Our family all learned early in life to take good care of themselves and look out for the main chance. I have been doing that ever since we parted, and nothing in the line of natural love and affection occurring until lately to interfere you may be sure I had some little wealth laid up when I set out on this tour to see those who were near to me by ties of blood. I must confess that I think life has gone rather easier with me than with you, though fate might have used you worse."

Sanford listened with interest. He was not a particle in doubt but that he was hearing largely the truth. It had been years since he had heard a word from this cool-voiced little woman, and he had not often thought of her of late, but he had always had a warm spot for her in his heart.

He, for the moment, almost forgot that other sister concerning whose fate he had been but lately troubling his brain. They were a singular family, to say the least; and well as the judge knew the fact, there was a surprise in store for him.

"Oh, I am all right, myself. Have had the usual ups and downs of a man who follows sport in such camps as this; but up to the present time I have held my own as well as could be expected, and am fairly well ahead on the game. Just now there is a little outside influence that is doing me no particular good, but I can stand it for the sake of the family."

He paused and looked more sharply into the eyes of the woman. There was the hidden laughter there, and the suspicion returned that perhaps she had something to do with the very matter of which he was speaking.

"Oh, go on. I'd admire to hear your side of the story. It is just as delicious a mix as mortal man ever dipped into—or mortal woman either. It would do me good to hear your version of it. Or, haven't you got one that you think would stand water with me?"

"You don't mean to say you are the woman in the case? Great Scott! What next?"

"Something more astonishing yet when you hear it, though I am not sure I ought to tell. The joke is such a good one, really, I should let you burst in ignorance as a reward for your not seeing it sooner."

She leaned back in her seat, her supporting hands clasped under the back of her head, and turning up her eyes to the ceiling uttered a low, musical laugh.

"Things can't be as bad as I fancied or you would never go off after that fashion; but I don't see where the joke comes in at. To the average man it would look as though you had played the fool mighty handsomely. If you haven't I'll be everlastingly glad to hear it."

"Oh, yes, playing the fool is my style, and always was. You ought to know me better than all that comes to. What do you think I have been doing to accuse me of such a thing?"

Her face took on a sober, almost a savage look as she stared up into his eyes.

"Well, whether Stella knows it or not, I would suppose it just possible you have been cavorting around the country with her husband."

"Granted. What then?"

"Why, then, I think you have been playing an infernally mean trick on the girl who was raised with us as our sister, and who I intend to stand by as though she was. We were always a trifle free and easy in our notions, but I did think you would have kept your fingers off of her property."

"And you intend to give me the grand bounce, just as soon as I allow the operation to be performed? There's brotherly kindness and affection for you! And I coming all these thousands of miles to visit you. Oh, you make me tired."

She drew herself up with quite an air of wounded dignity, and then scowled at her brother after anything but an affectionate and sisterly fashion.

"Can't help it, Vi. I have been looking at things from the other side and see the mischief of it. You never did have any too much affection for poor Stella, but I didn't think you would have ruined her home altogether."

"See here, old man, you are not very complimentary to the other fellow, or to me. I suppose you wouldn't like to put your exact opinion into words, and maybe you better not. It's just possible you will be glad you haven't done it when you hear the rest of it. What sort of a fellow do you suppose this husband of hers is, anyhow?"

Sanford shrugged his shoulders.

"When you get on the high horse the least said to you the less there will be to mend. I'm saying mighty little just now, except that I am on the other side, and that if anything has happened to Stella I will hold you both responsible for it. I can't take it out of you, perhaps, but I can make it deuced uncomfortable for him."

"Probably you are able to say just who you mean by 'him.'"

"Probably, since you begin to take that line, I can't, except that he must have been Stella's husband. Would you mind furnishing me the rest of the information?"

There was an undercurrent of sternness in his manner, though he tried to keep his temper. Viola could see that this man might be a sport and what the world called a bad man, but he had a certain amount of principle which she had shocked more severely than she had intended doing.

"So you can go and shoot him? Thanks, I don't care if I do. And I am just as certain you will do nothing of the kind when you learn all the facts. Wouldn't be surprised if you would go out and shake hands with him as friendly as you please if you were to meet. Brace yourself, now, there is a surprise coming."

"Let it come. I am old enough to hold my own head if it begins to swim."

"Well, then, the gentleman with whom I have been masquerading, and who is at present at daggers drawn with the amiable Stella, is no other than our long lost brother. Oh, it is the incredible that always happens in real life; and you are not more surprised than I was when I first learned the truth."

If the lady had counted on creating a sensation she was not disappointed. Accustomed as he had been for the greater part of the years of his life to concealing his thoughts and emotions, the judge found himself carried off his feet, to use a sporting phrase.

His sister leaned back again, and watched him with amused curiosity, while he gave vent to some incoherent exclamations.

"Yes, my dear brother, it is the unexpected which is fond of happening in this world, and this time it has happened with a vengeance. You can understand, I suppose, that my position is strictly loyal to Brother Jack, who is the Mr. Marvin in the case. Names don't go for much, you understand in this age and country; but if you had met you would have recognized each other fast enough. He knew the dashing Miss Viola Vining the moment he saw her on the stage, and I didn't have much doubt about him."

"And Stella does not know?" queried the judge, still in doubt as to how he should receive this intelligence.

"Of course not. How should she? Jack was the black sheep of the family, and had cleared out before she was introduced. She heard of him, of course; but never could have imagined he could have blossomed out temporarily into such a wonderfully fine

member of society as the bank president who won her youthful affections."

"But, I should have thought she would have recognized you."

"Bless your soul, she never saw me. She simply knows of me as a woman in the affair; and of course, thinks the worst of me possible. I had no particular desire to undeceive her; for, a woman who wouldn't stick to our Jack through thick and thin deserves all she gets. And I must say, she has been getting a heap."

"It does complicate matters a bit. Tell me the story from your side. I won't swear to come over, but I ought to know the whole truth. Perhaps I could give her some advice that would be good for all parties concerned."

"Not much to tell, and I know you'll play us fair, even if you do back her up. It was just this way:

"When Stella got on to her rich inheritance she gave the Sanfords the grand shake, and so you were left out of her life till she needed you again."

"Not her fault, altogether, poor girl. She tried to keep up communication with me, and offered me more than once all I needed. She never was ungrateful."

The judge spoke up loyally, and with firmness.

"That may be all right. She was kind enough to write to me once or twice, but I didn't care to continue the correspondence. If I had done so I might have saved her some worry. At all events, she met Jack and was more or less captivated. He was all gone on her, if the truth be told, or he would have arranged matters differently in the early days of the enchantment."

"Of course, he supposed he was going to walk right along on the prosperous lines he was then following; but he might have dropped an anchor to the windward.

"In course of time he got into difficulty and wanted her to help him out.

"Not a bit of it. To give her full due, she would have gone to the end of the earth with him, no doubt; but that wasn't exactly his game just then. He had a little affair on his hands in the matter of an anticipated visit from the sheriff, and he much preferred to work the racket through alone. The rest of the story I suspect she has told you. They didn't agree on the money question, there was a catastrophe, on top of a quarrel, and he slid out very quietly, accompanied by your humble servant, and left her a prey to as much suspicion as doubt. You are aware of the fact, no doubt, that she has been very broadly suspected of having killed him and run away. She, on the contrary, knows he is much alive, and while not wanting exactly to bring him back to justice, is interested in proving the facts. I don't know how she got on the trail, but somehow she must have done it or she would never have turned up here. What Jack and I want is to get a share of her half million and then slide out of the country. I'd just as soon take the trip abroad with him as with a worse fellow.

"And that is all of it?"

"Just about, except some matters of detail, which are of no importance."

"Then what are you doing here? Where is Stella now? How do you expect me to come into the game? Those questions you must have expected me to ask, and no doubt you have your answers ready for them. I am waiting to hear."

"I don't expect you to come in at all, and one of my objects here was to see if you wouldn't stay out till we got things on a fair basis. I don't intend any harm shall happen to Stell, though at present I have no doubt she is being interviewed by her liege lord and master. What we want her to do is to make a fair divvy of the wealth she has salted away, and when she does that I'll see Jack treats her fair."

"I am afraid Jack will do as he has been doing all his life—just as he wants to. What about your other object? I suspect I had better hear what that is before I make any rash promises. It must be a weighty one since you keep it in the background."

For the first time the woman hesitated.

It was only after a trifle of what seemed sober reflection that she spoke.

"If you must know it, I came in to see if I could find out who this man calling himself

Jackson Shaw really is. Do you know? Looks as though he might be Dan Garland, and yet, I have my doubts."

"And if he is?"

"He is doomed. If he is not, let him go. There are worse men in the world."

"Then I may be able to save him if he needs that operation. I can tell you it is not; and I ought to know."

"That can be relied on?"

"It can."

"Thanks. You may have done better than you know. Good-by!"

And rising suddenly, she darted out of the door.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHERE IS THE STRANGER SPORT?

It was only after his sister had left his presence that the judge remembered that the reason why he had at first been deceived by the appearance of his sister was because she was wearing some of Mrs. Marvin's clothes.

That fact of itself was enough to show that she had been concerned in the affair against Stella, and that the story she had told had in it a good many uncomfortable elements of truth.

"Poor girl," he thought to himself; "what infernal sort of a hopple is this you have got yourself into? Worse than you know of, and one out of which I swear I don't know how to help you. It's a fight I never could have dreamed of, and I swear I don't see how I can interfere. I suppose I should have turned in and made Vi a hostage; but, I swear, I don't see what effect that would have had with Jack. And one can't very well go to shooting his own brother. I suppose I will have to keep out of the mix altogether, and let this Jackson Shaw run the matter. He seems to be the man for the occasion. Wonder what the next move will be."

It was in a very bewildered way that the judge talked to himself, and he never once seemed to think it was his duty to follow after the woman who had so uncereemoniously taken her departure, for he knew not what point.

He remained there alone for fifteen minutes at least, thinking it all over, and in a helpless sort of way waiting to see if there would not be some development which might help him to make up his mind as to his proper course.

But Viola did not return, and with more of a sigh than the world would ever have given him credit for raising, Sanford was forced to the reluctant conclusion that his sister had vanished as abruptly as she had appeared, and that the best thing he could do would be to go over to the Big Pocket. It might be possible he would find Shaw there, and if so, he intended to test the truth of a suspicion which had come to him.

The draft on the resources of the bar which had been made during his absence were greater than he had expected when he gave his orders on dismissing the crowd, and things were in a lively shape when he got to the saloon; but so far no harm had been done, and he at once put on the brakes.

Business was business, and the moment he found himself in the midst of the crowd he became himself once more, as cool-headed and imperturbable as ever.

The game which the different phases of excitement had closed was not likely to be profitable for a time, but that was the first thing he saw too. The men who acted as his cappers were as sober and well balanced as usual, and there was little danger in opening out, while, if things once got fairly to running there was a chance that some extra spoils would be picked up. What might otherwise degenerate into a carouse could possibly be turned into profit.

"All right now, boys," was his careless address.

"Thanks for the way you were all ready to stand by me, and I hope you have had a good time. Business it is, from this time on, and the price of drinks continues on the same old basis that it was before the war."

There was still confusion, and loud talking, men were speaking both of the affair at the judge's house, and the matter which had preceded it. The two things were being connected together, and Captain Hardhand's influence was being seen in both. The question was, what did it all mean?

Sanford kept his knowledge to himself; and so, while it was not hard to explain that the outlaw chief saw certain advantages to himself in the cases, what relation they had to each other was the mystery which was puzzling the loungers.

The game drew away gradually from the ranks of the speculators, but there were enough left to turn things over and over, and ask many curious questions. If the men had known the true history of the interview between the judge and his sister more might have been asked, and of Sanford, too. They would hardly have discussed things so coolly had they known that the woman for whom they had begun to have a certain far away respect and admiration, was a prisoner, and that her fate was so unsettled that at that very moment the judge was shivering to think what it might be, even while he felt that he dared not take measures which might only hasten a catastrophe.

From the expressions which he heard freely made it began to look as though, should anything happen to Stella, he might have to do some tall lying to avoid a popular uprising against himself.

Supposing she never came back, and Viola had permanently vanished. He would have something to explain, and it would not do to tell the truth about it, either. There was a good deal of chivalry about the men of Red Bend, rude though they might seem at a careless glance. And they would be apt to make it warm for the man who had abandoned his sister, no matter what the complications might be.

"By the way, what has become of the Stranger Sport, anyhow?"

He heard the question asked from a little knot of men who were not altogether tired of the discussion.

There was something familiar about the voice, and yet, when he looked up, he saw the speaker was comparatively a stranger. He believed he had seen him a few times, at odd intervals, and that he was a visitor from one of the outlying camps, but beyond that knew nothing of him.

The question was carelessly asked, and not one in a thousand would have detected the earnestness which lay behind it. The judge, being accustomed to watch for all things which were hidden, took hold of it by instinct, and gave the speaker a more searching examination, though hiding it well.

He did not start, because he had got seasoned to surprises that evening; but he made a discovery which was by no means pleasant. In the boyish face of the questioner he recognized the lineaments of Viola.

The answer was not what he had expected. Vince Doyle had come sliding into the conversation. It was not certain whether he had not just entered the room. The eyes of the young stranger were on him, and they drew out a response which was news.

"Oh, I reckon he's wandering around in the mountains, if he hasn't gone out to look over the Diamond Drill by moonlight. He started to go it alone, but he picked up a pard, and the last thing seen of him he was striking out on the war-path with a shooting-iron in each hand."

"Kind of funny he's not back by this time," said the young stranger, without any sign of particular interest.

"He may have run into a snag, don't you think?"

"Oh, he's not that kind. There's been no heavy artillery fighting up that way or we would have heard something of it. He'll be around again just when he ain't expected; and if he runs against anything it will be bad—for the snags."

"That's so," chorused more than one voice.

"A fellow ez kin clean up five men, an' them with ther drop on him an' ail riddy ter shoot, kin take keer ov hisself 'most anywhere."

"Yes, if the luck don't run dry," put in Nippers, shrewdly.

"When that happens you can tell what is going to happen. The best man I ever knew was taken in by a fool of a coward who crawled under his bed, gave him chloroform, cut off his head, and got ten thousand reward for the operation. Fact. Saw him swinging the head around when there were a hundred men holding the drop on him,

and all ready to shoot, but he made his pile all the same. There's a heap in luck, and when Jackson Shaw's plays out he'll be ready to drop."

"That's so," said the young man with a shrug of his shoulders.

"But with that sort of a fellow it's awful uncertain to gamble on it that the hour has come until a shade after he has passed in his checks. From what I heard of him I'm betting good money he will be all right and around, running the Drill for all the wealth that's in it; and I wouldn't mind putting up a little more that he strikes it rich before the month's out. The judge has an interest in that same mine, hasn't he?"

"You're right he has."

"And I don't reckon he would weep if this same pard was frozen out?"

There was a steely glitter in the eyes of the young man as he spoke, and he gave one look toward Sanford, who was stepping forward.

"You are all wrong there. A pard is a pard; and just now this man, whom I never saw till a few days ago, is mine. His luck and my judgment will make a strike at the Big Pocket if the thing is in the rocks."

"That's all right. I was just a-wondering," put in the young man hastily. And at the same time a little sign was given which caught but two pair of eyes—and by both of them it was understood.

The judge turned away, and Nippers followed him. They found their way to a little private room, and before long the young stranger joined the two.

"Nippers, you know me?" he asked sharply, as he closed the door behind him.

Doyle looked questioningly from the querist to the judge.

"Oh, he is all right. In some things you have the nerve of a meat-ax. You need not be afraid to speak before him. And I want no nonsense. The straight goods. You know who I am?"

"Cherry Bite they call you when you're at home, and what you are I know well enough; but as to who—that is all I can say about it. Have to ask Hardhand or Woolly West about the rest of it."

"That's right as far as it goes. Now I want you to understand that I want nothing but plain truth, and if ever I find I haven't got it I'll see that you pass in your checks without your ever knowing how this happened. I'll shoot you down from cover as I would a skulking wolf. I swear it; and Hardhand will be helping me if he ever gets on the trail again."

The voice was hard and cold, and Nippers never doubted.

"I don't understand what you are after, but you ask and I'll answer."

"You know all about where this Jackson Shaw went to. Now, give me the particulars."

"Can't say that I know, but I can guess. I was on the trail to see what he was up to and I saw him meet a man that I knew belonged to the gang, though he was in what may have been a disguise. He called himself John Bright, if I am not mistaken; and I was pretty sure he was setting up a game. I didn't interfere. If there wasn't a trap behind it there was a sell out."

"And if he fell into that trap?"

"Don't know whether they would shoot him or hang him. Whichever was the easiest way out."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A COUNCIL OF WAR.

The disguised woman, known among the outlaws as Cherry Bite, did not seem astonished at the statement of Doyle. She had probably expected nothing else.

Very coldly she looked up at Nippers as she asked:

"Why?"

"Because this Jackson Shaw is supposed to be Dan Garland, the detective. If it is, it's Dan or them—and I reckon he fills the bill."

"How is that, judge? You understand just what it means to your partner. Is he the sleuth-hound, or, is he not? What do you know about it?"

She was looking as steadily at Sanford now, and it seemed to him she had more than anxiety for this man's simple life. He answered with no sign of hesitation:

"That is just where the mistake lies. I don't understand the ins and outs of things as you seem to do, or Vince, here; but I do know something about Shaw. I've met the real Dan Garland where there was no chance to be fooled; and I have met Shaw before, though he may not remember it. I know them apart—and it has been all my life my business to know men when I see them. I can swear they are not one and the same person. What has all this got to do with you and me?"

"It means that, perhaps, you have saved the man's life," was the quick answer.

"And if it comes too late, I am not sure but what it will work a vengeance for it. I warned them to hold their hands till they were sure; I told them I could find out; and they were mad enough to fool—me."

Perhaps it looked a little ridiculous, just then, to see what was apparently a young fellow, little more than a boy, striding up and down the room, with one hand on the butt of one of the pistols belted on beneath his loose, frock coat, while the other sawed the air, and all the time talking in a voice which was now most unmistakably that of a woman.

Nippers thought so, yet he never allowed even the ghost of a smile to linger around his lips. To tell the truth, he was too much astonished by the unexpected revelation. That Cherry Bite was a woman he had never once suspected. Even yet he could not understand what the connection was between her and the judge, and fought shy of committing himself. It was possible the proprietor of the Big Pocket was a sleeping partner of Hardhand's, or might hold some such office as his own, but it was hardly safe to presume on the assumption until he knew more.

"And if he is not Dan Garland, what under the sun brought him down here?" asked Doyle, at last, seeing the judge was wrapt in his own meditations, and that Cherry Bite had almost, if not quite, forgotten his presence.

"Looking after me," she responded, without realizing who the questioner was, and speaking more to herself than to Vince Doyle.

"He said, no matter where I went I would find him on the ground, and I might have known he would keep his word. But I had to be sure what he was after; had to know that he was not a detective, willing to coin the heart's blood of a woman if need be to serve his ends. Oh, a fine mess I have made of it. To think at my age I couldn't read a man better!"

The scorn she put into her words would have made her do murder if she had heard them from the lips of another. They roused the judge into speech, if not into action.

"It's a very pretty mess as it stands; but, I say, Vi, what are you going to do about it? Seems to me if I felt that way, I'd be getting a move of some kind on. The more I think it over the harder it is for me to see just how and where I am to interfere."

"You! You can do nothing. If either of you ever breathe a word of what I have been saying, I'll shoot the one that does it. I am not certain what is best for me to do, and I may as well wait till I am. There is no hurry—now. Either he is dead, or he is safe till morning. Perhaps they may find out their mistake and turn him loose, but it is not likely. How could they have been so fooled?"

That very puzzle calmed her more than almost anything else could have done. She ceased from her walk and stared at the wall without seeing it, in her depth of thought.

"If he's not Dan Garland, it's ten to one the Double Cinch Detective is at the bottom of the idea that he is. That's one of the ways he works. If you could tell just who it was that has been playing roots on you all, you'd be mighty apt to find Garland himself. And it looks to me as though this fellow has been helping him on in the game. I'll bet you'll find they know each other, if it's no worse."

The suggestion of Doyle was a shrewd one, and Viola caught at it, though he had hardly thought she was listening.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed.

"You have hit it the first clatter—and if Jack had played me fair I would have told him the whole truth, and maybe saved his neck. Now," she added, gloomily, "he will

have to take his chances. If I can save the one, I may have grace enough to give the other a hint, but I won't swear to it."

"And how about Stella?" asked the judge, bringing the conversation around to the point upon which he had been all the time thinking most deeply.

"Jack ought to be able to take care of his own hide; and though I would be willing enough to stand by my partner in a square deal, I'm not so sure yet that he has been giving it, and don't feel as though I am bound to go out of my way to look after him until he tells me so. But I tell you when a woman puts herself in my hands, and I give her my word to stand by her, it means business. What I want to know is, how I can save her, and do the least damage to other people that I ought to think of a little in the operation."

"You can't carry water on both shoulders, old man, and as I have been telling you all along, your best move is to stay out of the game altogether, unless I call on you for help, or give you some inside information to be used in the last ditch, if at all. There is just one man, outside of Shaw, who can help me at present, and I'm not sure I can trust him. If he comes over on my side, and there's anything left worth fighting for, we'll give them a deal that will make their heads swim."

"And maybe you'll tell me just where I'll stand when this thing is over? If there is going to be a general break-up, I've got to be on one side or the other, and which it is going to be I'd like mighty well to know, and now."

"You think you had better be getting ready to slide? I think so too. You have done about all the mischief you can, and I don't see where you can do any good."

Viola answered the question of Nippers in a very straight tone of voice, and one would have supposed she had no eyes for any one else; but, while she was speaking her thumb silently drew back the hammer of her revolver on which her hand had been resting.

Without warning, as she closed, the weapon flashed out, she wheeled as if on a pivot, and took a snap shot through the window. She had seen what neither of the others had noticed, a face pressing close to the pane, while the spy was drinking in eagerly every word of the conversation.

It made no difference to her, just then, who the individual might be. She held straight, and meant to hurt.

A cry outside, and the sound of a scrambling fall, showed her bullet had not gone wild, and while the two men rushed toward the window, Viola stepped coolly through the door.

The sounds had been heard, and half a dozen men were moving curiously, some toward the room, and some toward the outside of the saloon. She made a hasty explanation, the meaning of which was hardly too well understood, and passed on out, no one, fortunately, undertaking to stop her.

It did not trouble her at all to know that she had left behind her a man who had dropped to her shot, though she suspected it might be about as uncomfortable for that man to be found living as dead. She turned her face toward the mountains.

"I told Jack a bit ago that I was going to jump the game, but I didn't know he had stocked the deck on me the last deal. He ought to have known better than to have tried that sort of an advantage with me. We are a little too much alike. When we think we haven't had a fair show we make things awful sickly for the other side."

She heard the exclamations of surprise as the wounded man was being borne into the Big Pocket, and shrugged her shoulders.

"It will give them something to think about, and they won't miss me. If he wants to talk and is able, let him. He can do no harm."

CHAPTER XXX.

RUBE, THE RUSTLER, BEGINS TO SHOW HIS HAND.

RED-HOT RUBE had successfully bluffed the outlaws who had undertaken to hold him under surveillance, but, to tell the truth, they were almost ready to be bluffed, anyhow.

What they wanted to know was whether he had done his work. If he had he was tied to them tight enough, and there was no use to run any risk trying to call him down when he rode the high horse. If anything of the kind was to be done they were perfectly willing it should rest with Woolly West to accomplish it. Rube had already made a number of admirers by his free and easy ways, which he seemed so willing to back up with his weapons whenever required.

He had not far to go to reach the spot where he had left the outlaw court, and when he got there he found that though the assemblage was theoretically adjourned part of it lingered, and it was the part he most wanted to see.

Woolly West was, or had been, holding a conference with Mrs. Marvin, and seemed to think he had been scoring a point, while the lady was frowning anxiously, but saying no word.

"Et's jest ez I told yer," Woolly was saying, as with a light step the rustler drew near.

"You heared ther leetle cuss give hisself an' Garland away, an' he'd sell his soul an' yourn fur good, hard coin. Without sayin' we kin b'lieve erveything he's tellin' I kin reckon that he war on yer trail, an' counted on takin' yer back when the time war ripe; an' meantime he war pickin' up sich trifles."

"Why are you telling me all this? What is it to me? If you think you can do anything with those things as they are, try it on."

"I should smile," answered Woolly with a grin.

"In course ther boss will try it on; but that's a keyard er two more that he counts on flippin' when he plays ther rest ov his hand. An' it'll make a mighty mean sorter a game fur you ter be buckin' ag'in. Better kin ter terms while ther lamp's a-holdin' out ter burn."

"What sort of terms do you want me to come to? I told your master only a little while ago what sort of terms I would make with him. You do not suppose I would make a better deal with you?"

She drew herself up with savage scorn, and looked at the battered, rough appearing man as though she would kill if she could.

"Ye'r altergether too easy 'bout the snap, an' what we're wantin' are ter git at ther facts ov what it means. What's ter hinder ther boss goin' on, er sendin' a good man ez he could trust? That's ther key, an' that's ther receipt, an' ef you don't choose ter write yer name across ther back ov it it wouldn't be hard fur him ter do it fer yer. What yer holdin' back?"

"Simply, the man who tries to draw that half-million, unless accompanied by me, will be in the Tombs before he is an hour older. Do you suppose I would leave a fortune like that without some guards to protect it? No. You can tell your master that I have a lease on that vault while grass grows and water runs; and that if I never show up, that gold will stay there till doomsday. Ha, ha! A pretty arrangement it is, and you will think twice before you let any harm be done to the woman who has the open sesame to a little section of wealth like that."

Under his beard Woolly West swore softly, and without any intention of his voice reaching her ears. If this thing which she was telling was true—and it seemed more likely it was—she could afford to be independent. A person on whose life a half a million hangs is entitled to a great deal of consideration from those who hope to possess it.

"Oh, it is all truth I have been telling you. I prepared everything so as to be ready for just such a difficulty as this. If your 'boss' wants to take me on the trip with him we will go; though I will not guarantee the amount of profit there will be for him in it. The fact is, I came out here the for express purpose of endeavoring to prevail on him to take it. You can tell him as much if you see him before I do."

"I'll tell him, me ladybird; but ef yer wants ter hev a comfortable time while ye'r visitin' round the ranch ov Captain Hard-hand I'd edvise yer ter sing small when ye'r meet him. Ef he feels ez much like cuttin'

yer throat ez I does he'll do it in er holy min' nit, half-million er no half-million. An' blame me, ef I don't jest want ter do it myself, the wu'st sorter way; an' I'd like ter know what's ter hinder?"

His hand went up to the back of his neck, and he flashed out a long bowie-knife, which he carried there after the old, southern fashion.

Probably the movement was simply done for effect; but Stella remained unmoved, nor did she show fear or surprise a moment later, though she had cause enough for emotion of some kind.

"I'm ter hinder, Woolly, I'm ter hinder," rasped the voice of the royal rustler, and the barrel of the pistol he held rapped sharply on the crown of the outlaw's head.

"No nonsense, ole man. I kin pick trigger afore you kin turn. What's this I'm a-hearin' 'bout half a million? That's about the size ov ther pile I'm a-yearnin' fur; an' ef that's ary stump in ther road fur you galoots I reckon I'll go fur it meself."

Woolly wheeled promptly, his hand drawn back for a thrust, but as he faced about Rube stepped back a pace.

"Stiddy, boy! Yer heard it click, an' yer know she don't kerry no empty katridges. I don't want ter interfere with yer game, ef I am ter hev my divvy; but, ef you ain't able fur ett, jest count Rube on board."

It took nerve to stand there without pulling trigger, for the eyes of the outlaw were blazing, and for an instant it was really his thought to throw himself upon the cool intruder.

It was only for an instant, however.

With a harsh laugh he returned the knife to its sheath.

"Good ernuf ter skeer wimin with, but it'd hardly work with you. But, I ain't riddy ter hev yer mix in this, jist yit. Better take a back seat tell ye'r' called on."

"Back seat nothin'. When a pard begins ter talk that way I begins ter suspect. We'll lock arms an' cross this hyer bridge tergether. What war yer drivin' at?"

"Little too long a story ter tell yer right now, but I war only tryin' ter find out fur ther boss how ther land lay. An' mighty rocky it are, too. I've did my best; now, I'll let him try his hand."

Rube scratched his chin thoughtfully, and looked from one to the other.

He noticed that the eyes of Woolly wavered, and turned aside, but Stella stared him straight in the face. She had had a chance to see what manner of man he was, yet she neither appeared alarmed, nor disgusted.

"Woolly," said the rustler, at length; "I begins ter think you're no good. Half a million are big money—an' it strikes deep inter me bones yer don't mean me ter hev my sheer. Look a leetle out. I'm a-watchin' ov yer."

Very true was the statement, for the look of Rube—in spite of all the carelessness he put into his attitude—was keen, and his fiery glance seemed to read the other through and through. Woolly knew that no movement he could make would pass unobserved; and that he stood face to face with a man full of as desperate courage as ever he himself could claim. It had to be peace or war between them—and in either case Rube looked like a man who would claim the lion's share of the prey, no matter who had run it down.

"Strikes me, pard, ye'r' tryin' ter bluff Woolly West," was the cold answer.

"Ef I war sure ov it I ain't sart'in but what I'd snuff yer out whar yer stands. Why, blast yer black face an' ugly picters! Don't yer know I'm runnin' things hyer, an' that's a dozen good men riddy ter aim whar I point? You can't git away with 'em all; an' yer orter be too spry ter start ther game onless yer kin eat yer way through ther hull outfit. It's sure death."

"Who sez I can't ef I once sot meself ter goin'? Bless yer soul! Ett begins ter look ez though this war ther lay-out I bin a-watchin' fur, an' jest ther sorter gang I wants ter be ther boss ov myself. Woolly, I'll make yer a' offer. Ef I go in fur a empire, with this hyer lady fur a empress, an' I 'gree ter make yer gran' duke ov ther empire, right hand man, an' treas'rer gin'ral, will yer stan' by me?"

"That's yer game is it! No! An' I'll end it now."

His form was crouching as he spoke, and

he gave a leap forward, hurling himself at the rustler in a great, savage spring.

And just at that moment there was the sound of light running footsteps, a subdued exclamation, and the lights went out, leaving the place in utter darkness, while two men, locked in close embrace, rolled upon the ground in a savage struggle.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A NEW DEAL, AND A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

As no one but Woolly West was aware of the fact that the lad called Cherry Bite had decided to retire from business, and had taken what was supposed to be the active step, Viola had no difficulty in returning to the camp of the outlaws, and entering as a matter of course.

She was in her old disguise, and had so far mastered the feelings which had lately got the better of her that she seemed thoroughly the racketty, careless youth who had been admitted to all the secrets of the gang, and who was supposed to be as reliable as the best—or worst—of them.

If she had hoped to arrive before the case of Jackson Shaw was disposed of, she found that she came a little too late; and the men who had been detailed to watch the way in which Red-Hot Rube handled it, were not slow in telling her of it, when she came suddenly upon them.

From the careless way in which she asked her question, they could not be expected to know how her fingers itched to turn loose on them as she listened to the answer.

"Ye'r' right, they got away with him. Ther dried up leetle rat ov a Pinkerton give him away, an' we war jest riddy ter send him up ther flume when ther rustler chipped in, an' said he wanted ther job hisself."

"And he did it, did he? How?"

"Shot him f'ust off, an' then give him ther grand dump. He's down in ther hole, an' I reckon won't hev ter hev a grave dug; but ther boys'll fight shy ov bunkin' right round thar ov nights. Mighty good show ter see a ha'nt thar, I should say."

He shuddered a little, in spite of himself, and endeared himself more to Cherry Bite than he knew. What little sympathy he showed went for a good deal with the woman, who knew how scarce an article it was among these hardened men.

"Where's Woolly?" she asked abruptly, not caring to trust herself to further conversation on the subject, or for a moment doubting the truth of the report.

"Over in ther big hall, hevin' a confab with a duck he brought in an' war tryin' ter skeer. Say, he wants ter go slow how he handles ther contrack. Thar seems ter be big money in it, an' ther boys may think they better hev a sheer than work fur wages."

"Maybe you'd like to tell him so," answered Cherry Bite, with a sneer.

"Dunno ez I would ef his hands warn't tied; but I s'pect ther rustler wouldn't mind, an' half ther gang are all riddy ter foller him. He looks like a man ter tie to; an' when he talks—oh, my!"

Viola knew that the words meant a warning, and that the man was still loyal to Woolly, but she wasted no more time in finding out what was brewing. She turned from him and went on her way.

Just in time she stole softly upon the little group and heard the savage words of Woolly, as he hurled himself forward. It was her hand which dashed out the light, though it was done on a sudden impulse for which she could scarcely account.

Fortunate it was for the rustler, however, though he did not at once recognize the fact.

Woolly West came like a tiger, but at the instant darkness fell, Rube slightly changed his position, at the same time darting out his own strong hands and grappling with his antagonist, the advantage all on his own side.

There was a short, sharp struggle, and then, Woolly was down on his back, with the knee of the rustler boring into his breast.

It was just here the darkness was the salvation of the man on top.

Mrs. Marvin had taken a cool view of the affair until the extinguishing of the light; but the darkness and the savage conflict going on under its cover, unnerved her, and she uttered a wild cry, not so much of fear as of excitement.

Ears outside heard the cry, and there was a rush to the place. Three or four men with weaponed hands stood at the doorway, and could they have seen they would have shot.

"Steady, you, there!" exclaimed Viola sharply.

"Look out, now, or you will hit the wrong man. There has been a racket here, but no harm done. Get a light, some one, and pull the fools apart."

Then, she glided swiftly to the side of Stella, who was now silent, and had been motionless.

"Not a moment is to be lost," she whispered into the ear of the captive woman.

"When war breaks out among men like these, women want to hunt a back seat. Catch hold of my coat tails and follow as quietly as you can. I have an account to settle with them, but this is not the time to be doing it."

The dress of this person who approached her was that of a man, but the voice was that of a woman, and as nothing could make her case much more desperate, Stella followed the advice without delay, and Viola piloted her from the spot.

They made their exit none too soon, for in the place they left there was a very confused state of affairs for the next minute or so. The darkness gave now to one and now to the other of the two struggling men an advantage.

Woolly West was down, and had there been no chance of interruption he would doubtless have remained at the mercy of the other.

But Rube knew an attack was at hand from the outsiders, and loosened one hand to reach around for the revolver he had returned to its holster.

In doing so he loosened one arm of the under man, whose hand darted up on the instant and seized him by the wrist. Then, the lantern came, the men rushed forward, and the rustler had to look out for himself.

He sprung to his feet, striving as he did so to shake off the clutch; but he only succeeded in raising Woolly with him. He drew back to strike but the blow was never given.

His other arm was caught, and thus doubly hampered four men closed in on him.

Even then, for a moment, it seemed as though he would succeed in breaking loose. First one man and then the other, of the two who who most hampered, he tripped and flung down, but they held on to him all the same; and he in turn was overthrown.

With that the four dropped on him, each throwing his full weight on a limb. There was a mountain of flesh and strength on him, and as he lay on his face with his arms stretched above his head, it was impossible for him to bring his powers to bear in an effort to rise again.

"Shell I slip my knife into him?" asked one of the panting men, as he drew the weapon and leaned over so that he could be in position to drive it home.

It was a moment full of danger to the prisoner, for a word would have sent the blade downward on its mission of death. If he had been struggling, and with any seeming chance for success the word might have been given.

It appeared, however, that he recognized that for the present he was in the toils, and that no good could come of present resistance. He lay supine, and with not a word issuing from his lips. Woolly did not hesitate.

"No. Keep it ready, but don't use it unless I give the word. Then, let it go fur keeps. Twist his arms behind him, and tie his wrists. We'll hev him then, fur sure."

The men holding Rube felt a slight quiver while the words were spoken, but no wild effort followed, and they were inclined to believe that for the instant he had lost his nerve through the nearness of the steel.

The order was obeyed, and then he was turned roughly over so that West could stare down into his face.

"Ye'r a good man, I ain't denyin'," he slowly snarled; "but this time yer bit off more ner you could chew. I ain't sure what's best ter do with yer. I'll leave it so, an' dream over it a bit. Blamed ef I kin

quite make yer out. Yer may only be a fool; an' yer may be su'thin' else."

"Take him back ter whar we hed him; an' it would 'a' bin a dog-goned sight better fur his hullsome ef he hed stayed thar. Ef he kicks too hard drap him in ther sink ter look fur his friend."

With a wave of his hand Woolly stepped back, and finding the lamp which Viola had extinguished was all right, proceeded to relight it, and to look around.

He had heard the voice of Cherry Bite, but was too much engaged to think of what her presence here might mean. He had simply expected to see the boyish-looking face somewhere in the background, with Stella cowering near.

To his surprise, neither of them were visible.

Then, for the first time, the thought struck him that it might be the intention of his late little pard to play him false.

"She knows ther way out!" he exclaimed, not remembering that his words would hardly be understood.

"Head her off! Stop her; but don't yer dare ter hurt her! She's a woman! This way!"

The little procession which had formed to carry out the rustler halted, and the men looked inquiringly at their leader.

"Shell we drap him?" asked one of them; and the question brought Woolly to his senses.

"Git a move on, ez I told yer, an' then streak fur ther outside, 'ceptin' one ov yer ter watch him. We may head 'em off. It's too late ter foller."

He led the way himself, and the prisoner went along without a word. He was altogether too docile, and his silence seemed to have something in it that was suspicious. When the men put down their burden, Woolly advanced, and cast a single glance into the lowering face before him.

The effect of that view was startling. His revolver swung out as if by magic.

"He's a fraud, by mighty!" was his exclamation, and he threw up his hand, cocking the pistol as it rose.

But at the same moment Rube wrenched himself away from the hands still on him, and sprung straight down into the yawning chasm, just as the revolver of Woolly flamed out its message.

"By Heaven! It war Dan Garland hisself!" exclaimed West, as he rushed forward, and holding his hand over, fired downward as fast as thumb and finger could work hammer and trigger.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE SECRET OF THE UNDERGROUND RIVER.

The guess of the man known as Woolly West was a little late in the day but it was none the less shrewd. In the struggle the disguise of the double cinch detective had been somewhat disarranged; and when that was noted the rest followed as a matter of course.

No other man would have had the courage or the tact to play the game he had been playing. The question was, how much had he found out? For the man who asked it knew that it was no simple chase after Captain Hardhand, and his gang of marauders, which had brought the great light of the detective profession there.

The men who had heard the cry stood staring, without ever once advancing to the edge of the crevice.

One of them heard something like a sigh of satisfaction as he muttered in a tone loud enough to be heard by the rest:

"I don't keer who he war, he's dead now."

"Not so sure of that. The hound has more lives than a cat; and isn't the man to throw even one of them away. One of you get a rope."

"Yer don't mean ter go down thar, does yer?" asked the outlaw who had just spoken.

"Not just yit," was the dry answer.

"Docs any one know whar this thing kims out at?"

The question had never been asked before, and there was no solution ready for it, though there were several suggestions made while the rope was being waited for. When that came it was fastened by one end to the lantern, which was then lowered into the depths.

It was not as far to the bottom as had been thought, and they could see the water glistening below them; but there was no sign of the missing detective.

"Looks ez though he hed gone on down ther flume. No use lookin' fur him. An'I don't want ter be ther one ez tries it on, ef thar are."

"He can't git back," said Woolly, thoughtfully, as he carefully scanned the sides of the sink, slowly drawing up the lantern.

"What I'm afear'd ov are ther other end. Whar thar's a way in thar are gin'rally a way out. One ov yer stay hyer an' watch an listen, an' ther rest ov us'll scatter round. Ef Dan Garland gits away this time he'll make an end ov ther hull b'ilin'."

"But, ef this war Dan who in blazes war ther other feller?"

One curious fellow asked the question, but there was no answer. The sharp order of Woolly was obeyed, and like hounds at fault the outlaws began to search for the trail.

If they found the fugitive little doubt was there as to the course to pursue. Shoot first, and identify afterward!

Meantime, Dan Garland was not dead, nor did he intend to die, though a man of less nerve and resource would have been well nigh despairing, if, indeed, he had not already succumbed.

Knowing what would be his fate the moment he saw the eyes of at least the present leader of the outlaws had been opened at last, he did not hesitate to take big chances, though he was not without a well grounded hope that his lucky star, which had protected him through so many dangerous straits, would be with him again.

He knew more about this retreat in the mountains than did the very outlaws themselves.

What he once heard, Dan Garland never forgot; and he had heard something about this very spot, with its underground stream, and the course that eventually led to the open air. Just below the opening the water was deep enough to break the force of a fall, even of twenty feet or more, provided it was properly taken, and had his hands not been tied he would have dared the dive without hesitation.

Down he went, however, crossing his ankles, and striking the surface of the water feet first.

He came down like a roll of lead, and sunk as promptly, but by the time his toes struck the rocky bottom his momentum was so far checked that there was no shock, and he rose to the surface with the ease and grace of a practiced diver, turning over on his back and vigorously sending himself along with the course of the current, by a skillful movement of his lower limbs.

Almost instantly he shot out of any possible sight from above, and by the time the lantern was lowered to search the depths of the chasm he was well out of sight, swimming on his back along the narrow channel through which flowed the stream.

There was nothing for him to do beyond trusting to the course of the current, in the belief that it would eventually bring him once more to the open air. He knew, or believed that he knew one man, at least, had made the journey in safety, and he hoped two more would be as fortunate by the time his present trip was ended, but he had plenty of time to conquer grave doubts on the subject. Sometimes swimming, sometimes wading, the wet cords around his wrists biting more and more deeply, it seemed as though ages were elapsing.

Probably it did take a long time for him to make the journey, and just as probably it did seem twice as long, before he heard the sound for which he had been eagerly listening.

It was the point of real danger that he was approaching now, and the point concerning which his knowledge was the most indefinite. There might have been great changes here by the silent forces of nature, and the change would mean his destruction.

The water grew deeper again, so that it was impossible to reach footing on the bottom, and he could tell that the obstruction over which the current flowed was not far off. He would have given a great deal for light in the darkness, and even company would have been some relief.

Impelled by the latter thought he uttered a shout as he swept onward, turning his feet in front of him, as the safer way to meet the hidden dangers.

To his astonishment there was an answer to his cry.

"Keep to the left!" came up to him above the roar of the waterfall; and though it was hard to follow the advice he made an effort, and succeeded in changing somewhat his course.

Suddenly, his hands swept over the sharp edge of the rocks, he balanced almost upright for an instant, and then, half strangled, and beaten almost senseless in the wall of waters, the crisis came, and he shot downward.

The warning which he had received was just in time, and had perhaps saved him.

He dropped unharmed into a deep pool, and in another moment had struggled from the water, and was resting on a shelving shore of rock.

He shook himself something after the fashion of a dog after a bath, blew the water away from his beard and mustache, and then, trying vainly to pierce the darkness, shouted:

"Are you there, Shaw?"

"You bet, my gentle friend," came back the immediate answer.

"And safe?"

"About as safe as a man with a broken leg usually gets. I'm here, high and dry, and likely to stay here till some one helps me out. How is it with yourself?"

"Oh, I'm all right, of course, though I have had a mighty close squeak for it. They found me out at the last minute; and, as they had me triced up, there wasn't time to arrange for a new deal, and I had to bolt."

"Good luck so far; now, how are you going to help me? I suspect it is too heavy a contract without a little assistance."

"Leg broke, sure?"

"That's the size of it."

"And my hands tied behind my back. If I could get to you you might fix that; but that's the dickens of it. You seem to have been caught somewhere at a half-way station. Can't you come down?"

"Not without running more risk than I care to try. I kept too near the right bank, and dropped on a ledge that sticks out. If I had been wise I would have taken the rest of the tumble. As I wasn't, I managed to crawl away from the water, and now I am in the snuggest sort of a niche; can't go further, up or down; and if your hands are tied I don't reckon you could reach me, even if you had a light. Do you think you can wagon the rest of your way out without coming to grief?"

"Whether I can or can't, the thing has got to be done. I've had my little rest, and the balance of the way out is not hard. It is going to be tough for you, but if everything goes right I ought to get help here in a few hours. Hold on there till the last minute, and don't lose your grip. I'll see you through if it takes a wheel."

It was rather cold comfort, but it was the best Dan Garland could give. He gathered his wits together for renewed effort, staggered to his feet, and with a cheerful "so-long," set out on his way to find the outer world.

Had there been light, or even had his hands been free, he would have advanced rapidly and with confidence. But his life alone was not dependent on his efforts, for he felt reasonably sure that if anything happened to him it would involve the destruction of Jackson Shaw as well.

The remembrance of the man with the broken leg, crouched helpless in the little niche, caused him to feel his way somewhat carefully, and take none of those risks in which he delighted. If his progress was slow it was also sure, and at last he caught a glimpse of a faint glow ahead which he believed to be light from that outside world which he had been so longing to see.

The exit from the underground channel presented no great difficulties. There was little of head room at the last moment, but so the way was open Garland cared little for that. He launched himself away, and in a moment found himself in the river at the exact spot where he and Jackson Shaw had managed to play such a successful game on

Woolly West and the other outlaws who saw the mock flight and pursuit.

"I've done it," he thought, as he laboriously worked his way up on the bank, "but there's not another in a thousand who could have made the rifle. It's a weary journey to Red Bend; I wonder if I'll have to take it on foot?"

He pursed his lips together and uttered a long, low, trilling whistle. The act had its risks, but it was not without its reasons. He waited, listening, for a moment, and then the sound was repeated.

After a little he heard an approaching noise which did not frighten him. It was the springy gallop of a riderless horse. From the time he had made his way into the robber quarters Firebug had been tethered as to be able to free himself by an effort, and now he had come at his call.

The horse recognized his master and came up with the fearlessness of an old friend. He submitted to be placed in a position where the hampered man could mount him without too great an effort, and guided by the knees which had so often before controlled him, the noble animal turned toward Red Bend.

Some time later a little group at the Big Pocket were astonished to see a saddleless horse, bearing on his back a rider whose hands were bound together behind his back, come tearing down the street, steering straight for the saloon.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CONFIDENCES WHICH SURPRISED.

It was a sudden freak which caused Viola to throw her influence in favor of Mrs. Marvin; but when she was once committed to the cause, she intended to help it along for all it was worth.

If Woolly West had known how near he came to being shut down by her, then and there, he would have shivered, for more reasons than one.

As Cherry Bite, the trusted friend of West, and a youth who had apparently had the confidence of Captain Hardhand, Viola had remained unsuspected in the camp long enough to learn all of its ins and outs, and at this crisis she put her knowledge to good use.

Without hesitation she led the way through the darkness, and piloted the escaping captive without mistake or hindrance. She eluded guards and sentinels, and avoided coming into contact with any of the outlaws who might have desired an explanation had they seen the woman she had under her charge.

"There, I have done you a good turn after all, and I think we are safe now."

These were almost the first words spoken from the time Viola whispered into Mrs. Marvin's ear to follow her.

Stella heard them, but hardly understood. She was thinking of something else; and that voice, now raised to its natural pitch, brought back certain memories.

"Who—who are you?" she asked, catching the disguised woman by the coat sleeve, and bending forward so that by the uncertain moonlight she might read her face.

"Serious question, that. Who do you suppose I am? Bless your soul, Stella, I wouldn't have to ask that if you had come to me in the shape of the Old Boy himself. It's been a long time since we met, but I never forget. And haven't I a nice score to add up against you for the compliments of the season you have been kind enough to cast my way?"

There was bitterness under the assumed veil of carelessness, and Mrs. Marvin was not sure for the moment but that she stood face to face with a more deadly foe than even Woolly West.

"It is—it must be Viola!" exclaimed Mrs. Marvin, in the most genuine surprise.

"Good heavens! What next? Can it be possible that you are the woman I have been hating all along? That you should be the one to do me the last wrong one woman does to another?"

"Can't say, or see, that I have been doing any one a particular wrong, and you least of all. I have been attending strictly to my own affairs, except when I was looking a little after those of brother Jack, which amounted to almost the same thing. I had

a notion to let you stick for being such an unmitigated fool; but after all, I couldn't quite desert you, and came at the last minute."

"I understand now. It was you whom Mr. Marvin meant when he said that my place was being filled at Red Bend. I could not understand him then, but I see through it now."

"Not quite so hard as to look through a millstone, is it? Yes, I talked the matter over with the judge, and between us we had a very tearful time. He didn't know what to do exactly, in the face of this new complication, and when I left him he had about decided to do nothing at all."

"I could not blame him," said Stella, bitterly.

"After all, it is you who are near to him by blood, and it is only right that ne should take your side in the game. I am deserted all around, but I am not conquered yet. I'll save my fortune and go back to the world free from the imputation of a crime which was never committed, but which you wretches would be only too glad to see break my neck."

"Oh, come now! If this thing goes on this way we will get to fighting, and that is the last thing I want. In some things you can be sharp enough, but about that husband of yours I am sorry to say you have acted like a fool; and if I have stuck to him it was largely because I wanted to enjoy the nonsense. As for that same husband, I suspect I hate him a little more earthly than you do!"

"For how long?" asked Stella, quietly.

She was recovering her nerves, and began to see that Viola was at least not her enemy. If the change was a mystery it was one worth solving.

"Since he killed, or caused to be killed the man whom I loved."

"What! Jackson Shaw?"

"You are quick to guess. Yes, Jackson Shaw! The only man who ever was willing to trust me in spite of everything; and the only man I ever cared for. If I had not doubted him I need not have been here, and he would not have been dead."

"I do not understand, but it seems to me there is more in this than I could have dreamed of. What was Marvin to you?"

"Oh, simply my own brother."

"What!"

"Brother Jack, the old reprobate that in the days gone by you heard of but never saw. The real, true, black sheep of the family, who ran away before your budding innocence was adopted into it. I knew him as soon as I saw him again, and he knew me. Perhaps you can now understand the awful wickedness that made us stick together."

This last revelation more than staggered Stella, who did not for a moment doubt its truth.

"It was my jealousy that drove me wild, after all. And the worst of it is that he was never worth the pain he cost me. From this time on I swear I will strangle any such feeling as that. And one thing, which may give you a shade of hope: Whatever else the man you know as Rube, the rustler, may have done, he never killed Jackson Shaw. If I mistake not, the two were friends, and comrades; and I can well believe that the seeming rustler had bargained to do what he could for you, outside the work which had brought him here. Oh, if we had all been a little more open how much might have been saved!"

It was the turn of Viola to be surprised. Never once had she suspected that Royal Rube was other than he seemed. His assumption of character had been too perfect for that.

"What do you mean?" she anxiously asked.

"That the man who was acting the part of his worst enemy, and leading the outlaws on to believe that Shaw was a detective, was none other than Double Cinch Dan himself! When he took the game in his own hands, it was because he had some scheme in view to save him."

"And we have deserted them both!"

"No. I only acted as I was warned to act. Under no circumstances was I to interfere. If Garland over-rated his own prowess, the fault be his. He was handicapped,

indeed, by one promise on his part. He was not, unless in the direst extremity, to seriously harm Mr. Marvin."

"Then, you think?"

"That whatever may have happened to Garland, he had already provided for Jackson Shaw, who, unless he returned, is probably far enough away by this time."

Even yet it was hard for these two to exchange thorough confidences, though they had much to say. For the present, they were not fearing pursuit. Cherry Bite had her revolvers, and the darkness favored them. Besides, she had led the way, so that they were not following the course on which they would probably be looked for. Their objective point was Red Bend, of course, but Viola did not propose to go directly toward it.

Now and then they halted. Again they pushed on. The night was wearing away, and daylight was beginning to glow in the east. If both were not worn out it was a wonder. While they were deeply engaged in conference they heard a sound which brought them to a sudden halt, and caused them to crouch down.

It was a low, trilling whistle, sounded at no great distance ahead.

The sound was repeated, and they heard also the rush of hoofs. Dan Garland was calling to Firebug, and the steed was answering!

The horse darted by, and Viola saw that he was riderless. She also recognized him by intuition, and something of the truth darted through her mind. She caught Stella by the arm and hurried her forward.

The light favored, since it shone on the vista before them, while they were concealed in the shadows. They saw a man standing by the side of the quiescent horse. He mounted laboriously, and then gave a low shout of triumph as he turned away.

They recognized him as Dan Garland, and uttered an answering cry, but were too late. He heard nothing of it, and he never looked behind."

"Let us follow him!" urged Stella. "He may help us yet."

"No," demurred Viola; "let us see where he came from. His wake would be our line of danger, and I think there may be something learned from his trail. It may show if Jackson Shaw got away, as well."

They went straight down to the riverbank, and it was well they did so.

When Firebug broke away it was not altogether without notice, for half a dozen men were following. Had it not been for a few incautious words, and the crashing of certain careless footsteps; they would have surprised the two women, who had barely time to glide down the bank, and crouch under the shadow of it.

Stella was thinking only of the outlaws, but her sister-by-adoption had eyes for something else. She was examining the water's edge with keen eyes.

"Look" she said; "here is where he came out, and there is but the one set of footmarks. Has Jackson Shaw tried the same route, and failed by the way?"

They both stared around, looking for something which might give them a hint of how things might be, and it was Viola who first hit upon the solution of Dan Garland's appearance at the spot. She detected the low opening through which came the sullen water of the hidden river, and her quick mind grasped the whole story.

"It is the stream which flows under the sink in the cave. It was by that Dan Garland escaped; why has not Jackson done the same? Perhaps he is within, waiting? I will see!"

Stella would have stayed her, but she had been accustomed to having her own way too long. Without hesitation she broke away, plunged into the water, and disappeared under the natural arch of rock!

Almost at the same instant Stella heard the voices of the nearing bandits, and, without waiting to see if they would pass unheeding, she followed her leader.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"LIGHT THE FUSE."

DAYLIGHT had been coming fast since Dan Garland came away from his stranded friend, and though Viola, looking up the low arched channel, saw nothing beyond but black-

ness, there was behind her a warm glow of light, and she did not fear to advance. First, though, she tried her voice.

"Hello; I say, Jackson; are you there?"

The answer which came was a shock. From not very far away the words floated down to her:

"You needn't yell so loud. I'm very much here, and I'm likely to stay here, as I remarked once before. What under heavens are you doing? You better get a move on if you think you and Dan Garland can't hit it, for I reckon it won't be long before he'll be around with a full hand."

"You know me, do you? Well, I'll get a move on, but not in the way you suggest. I've come to stay, unless I can get you out of the hobble. What has gone wrong, anyhow?"

Shaw had recognized the voice in the first place, and could dimly see figures in the distance. It was as well he had made no mistake about trusting the woman he cared for. Guided by the sound of his voice she was coming nearer.

While she came he was explaining to her the trouble in which she found him, and she answered lightly:

"It's all right, old man, between you and me, if you choose to have it so; and I guess I'm not making any mistake when I say it. I was just a trifle doubtful about your intentions, and felt like shooting myself when I thought I had made a mess of it by being roped in along with the rest. I haven't much ammunition to throw away, but I'll try and make a little light on the subject and see how you are fixed. If I can't get you down here I'll have to try and get up there. We sha'n't stay apart much longer when you are needing me."

Viola had a water tight box with a few wax matches, and she used them to the best advantage. Even by their feeble light she saw that it would not be so hard to assist Shaw down, though it would be at the risk of some pain. Fortunately, her hands were not tied, and she was able to see what sort of work was to be done.

She was already as wet as she could well be, and crossed the stream without hesitation.

"You are not the lightest weight in the world," she laughed up at him; "but then I am not the weakest woman; and I learned all about such things on the stage. Trust yourself to me, like a good boy, and I'll do the best I can for you."

At the proper time Stella struck another match. Shaw then suffered himself to slip downward, and Viola caught him, and carried him to the smooth beach on the other side. She made her burden wince, but he bravely held his peace, and his first movement, when her arms unclasped, was to reach for an inner pocket.

"Dan thought I might have use for a derringer and loaded me up. It looks as though I might need it now. Who is that coming?"

The light at the entrance was darkened, and somebody came stumbling through the water. In her interest over the man she had just found, Viola was off her guard, and Stella would never have noticed him.

She wheeled suddenly, and spoke sharply.

"You, there, hold on! Another step and I'll drill you. What you wanting in here?"

The advance ceased on the instant, and the man bent forward, trying to pierce the darkness which hid his challenger.

"Oh, you know me, and you know I can sling lead just about where I want to put it. Slide out of there in ten seconds by the watch or I'll send you out floating."

"I'm goin'," responded the man, throwing his hands up. "Mebbe yer hev word fur ther boss. Ef so spit her out, an' I'll try an' take it in ez I go along."

"Tell your boss that the game is up, and the sooner he pulls out the less chance he has of getting Dave Garland in his wool. The game here is off, and he has a chance. With me to back her, Stell can keep her neck and her half million."

Shaw kept silent, and it was just as well. Even yet it might be hard to make these men believe that he was not the double cinch detective. So long as they did not hear his voice, they could not have more than a suspicion of his presence, and the bluff of Cherry Bite might save them from present trouble.

The outlaw went out with more haste than grace, and was greeted by Woolly West on his return to the outer world.

"Any sign?"

"Heaps ov sign! Cherry Bite are in thar, waitin' fur Dan ter git back, or else he lies. Ther leetle cuss hez played roots on us, an' I d'unno who ter trust now. He give me a blamed queer message, an' mebbe you'll be understandin' it. Bercussed ef I do."

"Spit it out, man! Spit her out!"

Woolly had a suspicion that he knew what was coming, and wanted to be assured that his opinion was not wrong. He listened without a word while the road-agent repeated the warning he had been commissioned to deliver.

"It's all a bluff game," he gritted when the fellow was through. "Dan got erway 'thout ever seein' em, an' ef he comes back he'll never think ov lookin' thar. It'll be us he'll be tryin' ter roust out, right now, er stay hyer tell we git back. We'll give yer five minnits, an' ef yer ain't out by that time well blow up ther rock, choke ther outlet, an' leave yer hyer ter soak. We got dynamite ernough ter dam that stream ter 'way back, an' ef yer don't knuckle we'll do it. Ef yer gits drowned in ther operashun don't blame me."

He waited for no answer, but wheeled and went back. Then, he said a few words to a couple of his men, who immediately departed. During their absence he only waited.

Cherry Bite knew well that the words of her whilom friend were no idle bluff, and Mrs. Marvin was of the same opinion. He might not intend to do all that he said, but he certainly meant to do something, and no doubt it would be desperate enough. She was in doubt what was her best, though never once did she think of surrender. In a low voice she discussed the subject with Shaw, and, meantime, the moments were flying.

After what seemed considerably more than the five minutes allowed a voice was heard again, though now the speaker did not venture under the arch.

"Last time ov askin'. Ther dynamite are hyer, an' we're puttin' it in whar it'll do ther most good."

"Fire away!" shouted back Viola, but she did not feel half as cheerfully as she spoke, and would have given a fair little fortune to have been able to see what the men outside were doing.

They were in sober earnest in carrying out the plan as already outlined, though whether it would work exactly as West said was a problem they did not take time to study. The leader directed things, watching the preparations with a vicious sneer.

These men were no new hands in the use of such materials, and worked rapidly. The blast they were putting in might tear down tons upon tons of rock under circumstances of so much advantage.

"Now," said Woolly, triumphantly, "we'll give Red Bend a noise ter study over. Light ther fuse!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE FINAL ROUND-UP.

If there had been a match in the hand of the nearest man the fuse would have been lighted; but, fortunately, there was none, and there followed a momentary delay.

Then came a noise, but it was not the noise they were waiting for.

Along the trail from Red Bend arose the clatter of hoofs, and the sound of furious galloping. Dan Garland had wasted no time, and was coming, with a force at his back. It was only natural his eyes should turn at once to the place where he had burrowed from under the mountain, and in a glance he saw the waiting outlaws.

He was afraid they would not linger, but it was too late now for regrets. Tightening his gripe on Firebug, he gave a yell that

quickened even the furious pace at which they were going.

The outlaws did not care to receive him. Even Woolly West showed no disposition to tarry, for he saw they were clearly overmatched. Red Bend had borne their presence for a long while, in the vicinity, but had risen *en masse* when they had Dan Garland and a sprinkling of his men to urge them on.

The distance was rather long range for revolver shooting, but the Winchesters in the party began to talk, almost on sight, and there were some men of Red Bend who could shoot to a charm. At the first volley Woolly West dropped, and several of the road-agents winced as they scrambled away under cover. The fight, such as it was, was over almost as soon as it had begun.

Almost instantly Garland was by the side of the fallen man, throwing himself off his horse.

"No, use, Marvin," he said as he bent over him, and wrenched the revolver from his weakened fingers. "You gave yourself away up there in the cave, and you are my meat. There's a sawbones in our outfit, and he'll tie you up if you are a good boy, but you can't get away."

Garland had forgotten nothing, and there were torches, and a litter, in the outfit. At the head of three men he made his way into the tunnel, sending his voice before him:

"Coming, Jack, and I reckon we've scooped the best part of the outfit, and have the balance on the run."

"Good for that!" answered the voice of Viola.

"You are just in time, for I believe he has fainted."

The sound of the guns had faintly entered the channel, and Shaw, forgetting his condition, had tried to spring to his feet. The pain was too much for him, and temporarily broke down the nerve that had carried him along so bravely.

It was just as well, however, for when he returned to consciousness he was in the open air, and Viola was ministering to him, while Mrs. Marvin was bending sadly over her wounded husband. She had no great love for him now, but she could not altogether forget what he had been to her.

While he was about it, Garland thought it might be as well to look after the balance of the road agents, though they had never been his real game. He led a force of men to the cave, but found it empty. From there they went to the little cantonment where Dan had first joined the outlaws.

Mexican Joe had taken his departure, but they were just in time to meet John Bright coming out of a cabin, a ghastly look of horror on his face. Inside he had found Captain Hardhand—dead from the small-pox.

Viola, having tested the lover who had sworn to follow her through fire and water, nursed Jackson Shaw to convalescence; but, as it was done in the house of her brother, there were no remarks made about it. If there had been it would probably have resulted in a coroner's inquest, for the Stranger Sport was by no means disenchanted. As he and his partner, Judge Sanford, have since made a true strike in the Diamond Drill—concerning which he had received a pointer before making his appearance at Red Bend—it is probable that Miss Viola Shaw finds that at last her lines have been cast in pleasant places.

Nippers faded out of sight before the return of the rescuing party to the town, and the most of the other characters require no particular mention.

Marvin had been as true to the life in his personation of the desperado, as had Dan Garland in his assumption of the character of Red-Hot Rube, the rustler. He had even succeeded in deceiving his own wife, and drawing the wool over Dan Garland's sharp eyes until the last minute!

He was not taken home exactly in triumph, but he reached the East, and, though not destined to go out of life by way of the gallows, had a narrow escape from doing it. He served his country, after the fashion of a one-legged man, in jail, while Stella enjoyed her fortune after the best fashion she could compass.

After all, it is possible that she sometimes had regrets that ever she had started Dan Garland on the trail.

THE END.

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